

BLIND DUNCAN'S BLUES

by

Arthur Jaz

adapted from short stories written March 2000 -July 2003

FINAL DRAFT

January 4 -July 15, 2004

Original title: DUNCANWORLD

Winter in Duncanworld

The voices return to my ears even now, memories and dreams combined to form one giant mesh in my head. There was light; there was darkness and motion. The world around, above, below me was huge; it needed to be explored. I knew that even as a very young child.

We were going outside. Ricky opened the door. Light poured in. My father was not there; I knew that because I couldn't smell his cigars. My mother snored from the back bedroom, oblivious to our expedition. Rhiannon picked me up off the floor. "We have to be back in in a half hour," she said. "That's when my cartoons come on, is in a half hour. Fred and Wilma Flintstone, and Dino the dinosaur dog."

Ricky stamped his feet when he walked. He made a funny noise; Rhiannon laughed, and so I did too. Then we were outside and Ricky slammed the door.

"You'll wake up Meredith!" said Rhiannon.

"Mairdit?" I said.

"Meredith," said Ricky. "Say Meredith."

"Mairdit."

"That's close enough," Rhiannon said. She wrapped both arms around me and carried me, walking through the snow away from Ricky. Her redhair doll was in her other hand. She said something to me and jumped up and down. The back of my head smacked Rhiannon's shoulder. I cried a little.

"Shh," Rhiannon said, touching my tears with her finger. She must have been about five years old at the time. "Shh. You don't hurt. I'm taking care of you, Duncan."

Outside was bigger than my playpen, and colder. I had my coat and shirt and pants on but I was still cold. The wind blew a little. The world was white.

The cat ran by. Ricky picked up a handful of snow and threw it. The cat ran away. Ricky laughed. He was six. I was between a year and a year and a half old. All of this may be real, or none of it. But the memory is strong.

Rhiannon put me down on the ground by her redhair doll, close to the garage. She ran to Ricky and punched his arm and yelled, "Stop throwing snow at Snuffles!" Ricky laughed again, stomping in the snow.

The ground underneath me was wet and chilly. I stuck my hand on the ground to see if my hand would feel the wetness too. It did. That was why Meredith always put mittens on my hands, to protect them from the cold and keep them dry. Rhiannon had forgotten my mittens.

Rhiannon sang a song about a brown-eyed girl. I made some noise, imitating her as best I could. She sat down in the snow next to me, smiling, and played with the redhair doll. "Frannie is my doll and she says she likes you, Duncan," Rhiannon said. "She says she likes ham sandwiches and she doesn't like Ricky. She knows how to do her A-B-C's and count and tell time already. She says--"

A snowball hit the back of my head. Somewhere behind me Ricky giggled. I turned around but I couldn't see him.

Rhiannon yelled, "Stop throwing snow at Duncan! He'll get sick! I'm tellin' Meredith and she'll spank you and call you a dummy!"

Cold. Wet. The water from the snow began to drip down my neck. I wondered how long it would take to dry.

Ricky emerged from behind the garage, running back and forth around us. "Go ahead, Doodyhead! Go ahead and tell! Meredith don't care nothin' what I do. Duncan don't care neither, do ya, Duncan?"

I spoke. I said a lot of words but Ricky and Rhiannon didn't seem to understand me. Then I said, "Reeny," and Rhiannon laughed and squealed and grabbed me and picked me up off the cold, wet ground. She ran through the yard, holding me tight, singing and laughing and giggling, and everything became a blur: sky, bushes, branches, all a tidal wave, everything. She got tired of running and stopped. I felt sick but I didn't throw up. Rhiannon hugged me close to her and kissed my cheek. Her lips were warm and I forgot how cold I was for a minute. Rhiannon said I was being good. She sang some more. That was when time began, as far as I'm concerned.

Dynamite Fire

One more glass of lemonade and it would be time for Johnny Z to show up. “How many is one?” Rhiannon used to ask me. “One,” she said, holding up her index finger. I drank lemonade. It tasted great. Ice clinked in my glass. I could almost see in the glass the reflection of the hot, perfect sun.

Rhiannon was drawing pictures on the sidewalk. I looked. There was a clown, a tree, a horse, a bird with very long legs. Purple and green chalk on bumpy gray sidewalk. Little pebble rocks in sidewalk’s cracks. Rocks were fun to throw, but the only person I ever threw them at was Ricky, and then only if he called me names, like “loony bin.” The rocks usually didn’t hit him though; I couldn’t throw straight when I was three.

I wanted somebody to play Duncan Gang with me but nobody wanted to play. Rhiannon played at first but she got tired of it and wouldn’t play anymore. I thought it was a great game; it could go on all day. But it wasn’t any fun if you played it by yourself. It wasn’t as if there was no one around. Bill and Meredith and Grandma Ruth and Uncle Jim were in the kitchen talking about boring stuff. Bill and Meredith were our parents; they refused to let us call them Dad and Mom. I was a little scared of Grandma because she made weird noises and I didn’t like the way she smelled. Everybody but Meredith thought Grandma was crazy because she talked about Grandpa Sherman like he was still alive. She thought he was on vacation in the Fiji Islands. People would shake their heads and look at the floor, and Grandma would just keep saying he was in Fiji.

Ricky thought Duncan Gang was a dumb game. Rhiannon didn’t like to play. I’d just have to wait for Johnny Z to show up. He could drive the van, and I’d sit up front

with him and we'd honk the horn. Maybe later we could switch places. Bill and Meredith and Ricky and Rhiannon and Uncle Jim and Grandma Ruth could ride along too, in the big seats behind the driver's seat. We'd all sing: "HERE COMES THE DUNCAN GANG AGAIN... HERE COMES THE DUNCAN GANG AGAIN..." and Rhiannon would sing the loudest because she could sing the best. Everyone would have to brush their teeth first, because you couldn't get in the van if you didn't brush your teeth. Those were the rules. The game was fun. But nobody ever seemed to want to play.

Johnny Z liked to say I was smart. Whenever I was scared he'd appear next to me and he'd help me stop crying. Rhiannon helped me too, but she couldn't see Johnny Z even when he was standing right in front of her. Johnny Z said Rhiannon was nice anyway. Ricky made fun of me a lot and said Johnny Z was fake. Johnny Z told me Ricky was a mean little boy.

I didn't want to wait outside for everybody to come out, so Rhiannon said she'd tell Johnny Z we'd play Duncan Gang later. She drew some more sidewalk pictures. One was of a dog she called Sideburns. I went inside. In the kitchen Bill was arguing with Uncle Jim. They never got along much unless they were drinking beer together.

Grandma smiled at me. She said, "Dunkie! Come see your Grandma!" I looked around, but there didn't seem to be any way out of it. I walked over to the table where everybody was sitting. I started to climb up in her lap but then she held out a hand and said, "No, no, you gotta get away from me, pesky boy. I forgot I'm s'posed to call your Grandpa. You can give me the phone though, and a glass of water."

Meredith poured the water for Grandma while I picked the receiver off its cradle and brought it to Grandma. The cord stretched across Bill, who was just taking the first puff of a fresh cigar. He shoved the cord out of his face and said, "Damn, Ruth, your husband's dead. Get over it! He's been dead six years now, so stop being a fruit loop."

"Bill," Meredith said, then stopped.

"Dead. What's dead?" I asked.

"It's what your Grandpa is, hotshit," said Bill.

Grandma dialed a number, paying no attention. Bill took another long puff of the cigar, rubbing his temples with his free hand at the same time. Grandma spoke loudly into the receiver: "Yep, whatcha doin' Sherman? How's Fiji? Sure wish you'd get back soon. Dunkie brought me the phone so I could call ya. Uh-huh. Yep, she's still married to that thickheaded sap. She don't listen to me. Yep--"

Bill grabbed the receiver. "Who is this?" he said.

"Gimme that back!" said Grandma. She shook the table and some of her water splashed out of the glass. Ricky came in from the living room and sat down on the floor, playing with a Matchbox car.

"Bill, for God's sakes, give her back the damn phone!" said Uncle Jim.

"Yes," said Bill to whoever was on the other end of the line, "I'm terribly sorry. I don't think my mother-in-law has all her biscuits buttered on the right side of the tracks, if you get my meaning. She won't call again... Well, piss on you too!" He thrust the receiver at Meredith, who walked back over and hung it up.

"That was a private call," said Grandma.

"*That*," said Bill, "was either a woman or a man with an abnormally high voice. Either way, definitely *not* your dead husband. He's dead, right Duncan?"

I raised my arms, palms toward the ceiling. "I dunno," I said. "I'm just waiting for Johnny Z to get here. Dunno where he is."

"Maybe he's in Fiji with Grandpa Sherman!" said Bill, shaking ashes off his cigar.

"I oughta belt you," Uncle Jim said. "You're not funny, you're not creative, and you're hurting Mom."

"He don't hurt me!" said Grandma. "I *know* he's a son of a bitch."

Ricky snickered.

"See?" said Bill. "She knows it, and I know it, and everybody else knows it, so what the hell's your problem? Everybody knows it. Meredith, am I a son of a bitch?"

Meredith stared at him, not saying a word.

“What’s a bitch?” I said.

“Duncan, go look for your make-believe friend,” said Bill.

I went to my room. Big Bird and Grover and Oscar smiled at me from their places on my wallpaper. I yawned, stretching out on my bed. The birds outside were singing fun tunes. I closed my eyes so I could hear them better.

Then I opened my eyes and it was dark. I was alone. I knew the light switch was on the wall by my door but the door was all the way across the room. The door was closed and I could hear TV noises on the other side of it. I could feel hair falling in my eyes. Meredith kept saying I needed a haircut but she never got around to taking me to Shorty the barber. It was too dark now to play Duncan Gang. I wondered if Johnny Z ever showed up, and if Rhiannon talked to him for me.

Voices from the TV said big words, and Bill laughed from the other side of the door. I got down off the bed and started walking toward the door in the dark. Lots of steps. “Lots more than one,” Rhiannon would have said. I knew how to count but sometimes I had to think about it first. The dark scared me but I didn’t want to cry. Crying too much meant you were a chickenhead. The closet door was open. I thought I saw Darth Vader standing in there. I had to make it to the light switch, he’d get me otherwise, walk, walk, fast walk, run, ouch I smacked into the door, my heart was beating fast, oh no, had to find the switch, where was the switch? I wiggled my fingers around until I found the wall, then made my fingers climb the wall until they found the switch. The light jumped from the switch through the wall, into the ceiling, and down to the light fixture attached to the ceiling. The room was bright and I could see Grover and Big Bird again. Darth Vader was not in the closet; there was just a black sweater hanging up. I opened the door and stepped into the living room.

Ricky and Rhiannon were sitting on the floor watching TV. Meredith was lying on the couch. Bill was smoking a cigar in the rocking chair. Dynamite blew up on TV and

people screamed. I looked around to see if Grandma Ruth and Uncle Jim were still there but they were gone. I sat down in front of Rhiannon. She ruffled her fingers through my hair.

“Duncan James Pierce, this program isn’t for three-year-olds,” Meredith said to me.

I looked back at her. “But Johnny Z didn’t get here and I fell asleep and now I wanna be in here with Reeny.”

Rhiannon kept looking at her brand-new watch. Ricky watched the dynamite people on TV and ate popcorn from a big white plastic bowl. I reached out to take a handful of popcorn but Ricky slapped my hand. “Mine,” he said.

“Give Duncan some,” Meredith said. I reached out again and took two pieces of popcorn. It was salty and buttery.

Rhiannon held up her wrist to show everybody her watch. It was yellow with big hands. “It’s 8:30,” she announced. More dynamite fire. Meredith told me to go to Rhiannon’s room and play, so I went.

Rhiannon’s room was more fun than mine. Her toy box was bigger, with rubber ducks and redhair dolls and choo-choo trains. Johnny Z was sitting on Rhiannon’s bed, shuffling a deck of cards. He looked shorter sitting down but he was still taller than Bill.

“Hi there, Duncan! What’s going on, big man?”

“I waited for you and then I fell asleep in my room!” I said.

“I’ll drive the van tonight just for you,” he said. “I’ll be back in two minutes.” He left through the window to get the van. I was alone again, with hair in my eyes.

I sat on the bed, picked up one of Rhiannon’s books. I acted like I could read it but I didn’t know how to read. Rhiannon could read it to me. She liked reading me stories. Sometimes she drew me pictures of animals and people from the stories. I liked animals. I liked turtles and dogs the best.

My stomach roared. I'd slept through supper. Meredith would be mad if I went back into the living room to get to the kitchen. I was hungry anyway so I left Rhiannon's room. I made up a game that the floor was burning dynamite fire and I couldn't touch it. Jump, jump, jump.

"Don't jump on the goddamn furniture!" Bill yelled.

"The floor's burning hot," I said.

"Walk on it anyway! I told you you were hotshit. This'll prove it!"

I walked across the floor to the kitchen. "You made me burn!" I said.

"I'll make your ass burn if you jump on that chair again."

Meredith followed me into the kitchen and made me a peanut-butter sandwich.

Johnny Z always drove the van when we played Duncan Gang. He said I'd be driving when I got bigger. But I couldn't get bigger because then I wouldn't be Duncan and there wouldn't be a Duncan Gang to drive around. I'd be somebody else. I'd be as big as Johnny Z and bigger than Bill. I'd be tall and strong like the trees behind the garage. I'd do anything I wanted to. I'd watch dynamite-blowing-up movies and jump on the couch and chairs. That's what growing up meant. I'd do anything I wanted.

I finished my sandwich by myself in the kitchen. Everybody else watched TV.

After a few minutes Rhiannon came into the kitchen to see what I was doing. I said, "I don't want to sleep in my room."

"Why not?"

"Cause Darth Vader'll get me and choke me and I'll be dead like Grandpa Sherman."

Rhiannon grinned. "Okay. You can sleep on my floor. Get your sleeping bag and your blanket."

In her room Rhiannon read me a story. There was a train in the story, and it was moving up a big hill. The train said, "I THINK I CAN I THINK I CAN I THINK I CAN," all the way up. Then it got to the top of the hill. Rhiannon showed me pictures of

the train in the book she was reading. The train had a big smiley face. She smiled too, and I looked at the gap in her mouth where her front teeth had been before they fell out.

"Are my teeth gonna fall out too?" I asked.

"I think," she said. "Mine did, so yours probably will. My friend Ellen said the Tooth Fairy leaves her quarters for her teeth. But I never got any money so the Tooth Fairy musta got lost."

"Oh," I said.

"Time to get to sleep. Night, Duncan!"

"Yeah."

I tried to sleep on the floor with my Yogi Bear blanket on me but I didn't need it because Rhiannon's room was warm. Rhiannon was in her bed asleep. I couldn't sleep. I could hear Meredith and Bill talking in the kitchen. Their words were too big and too fast for me to understand but they sounded mad. They were keeping me awake. Something broke; there was a loud crashing noise, then the sound of Meredith crying and saying, "I didn't say anything against you, so what's your problem?"

From the bed I heard soft whimpering sounds, then a snuffle. Rhiannon was awake. She was crying; the nightlight showed me that.

I stood up and walked over to the bed and draped my Yogi Bear blanket over her.

"Thank you, Duncan," she said, pulling me up so I could sit in her lap.

"Are you scared, Reeny?" I asked.

"Yes."

I looked at her. "You're six and *you're* scared?"

"I still get scared even though I'm older now," said Rhiannon.

I heard footsteps from somewhere past Rhiannon's bedroom door. Maybe it was Johnny Z and he had the van with him to get us out of there.

It was Ricky. He still smelled like popcorn. He shut the door behind him and sat up on the bed with us. Meredith yelled, "No, don't--" and there was another crashing noise.

"I saw Bill break a kitchen chair," Ricky said.

Rhiannon sucked in her breath.

Ricky frowned. "Bill don't hurt me. I *know* he's a son of a bitch."

All three of us hid under the Yogi Bear blanket. We could hear Meredith and Bill, still yelling from somewhere far away, in another world. I wondered again where Johnny Z was. He'd said he'd be there in two minutes. How many was two?

Cat Food

I watched old black-and-white movies inside with Grandpa Ted while Ricky and Rhiannon played outside. Grandpa Ted was the one who introduced me to the Marx Brothers, those four crazy men who ran around and made fun of each other and everybody else. They made me laugh, especially in the movie where they played football. It seemed like that one played constantly on channel 41 the year I was three.

That was probably where the Italian accent came from--watching Chico Marx in the old movies. Grandpa could do the accent too, and a lot better than me. He could do all kinds of voices; sometimes Grandma Lucy was amused by them, sometimes she seemed aggravated by them. They were Bill's parents, and they lived in a one-bedroom house on the edge of Nelson, five miles away from our town of Bentleyville.

I tried doing the accent. I practiced it over and over again, trying to make it sound as funny as Grandpa Ted's rendition, probably because it helped me remember him on days I couldn't go to his house because Meredith wasn't working at the beauty salon. One rainy afternoon I followed Rhiannon around the house, Meredith's broom in hand, chanting, "Get-a your Tootsie Frootie ice-a cream-a!" She actually went outside in the pouring rain to get away from me because I was getting on her nerves so much. But I only did it because I missed Grandpa Ted, and because I wanted to be Chico Marx.

The tears welled up; I couldn't stop them. Ricky was so much bigger than me. It wasn't fair that he could make me do whatever he wanted me to do, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

On this day we were all at Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy's house in Nelson. Rhiannon was singing for Grandma Lucy to help Grandma get to sleep after taking her pills. I still had the taste in my mouth. A huge shape loomed over me. For a moment I thought it was Ricky. But then my eyes focused past my tears and I heard Grandpa Ted's clear, precise voice adopting a Canadian drawl: "Somethin' wrong with ya, eh?"

I wiped my eyes, not wanting him to see me crying. He picked me up, carried me to the living room. Together we sat in his favorite chair, me in his lap. I could hear Rhiannon in the bedroom, singing "Bicycle Built For Two" for Grandma Lucy in the softest tones she could muster. Rhiannon seemed to know every song ever written, even at the age of seven. Grandpa Ted glanced at the TV. There was a car commercial on.

"Who broke your leg, Sassafrass?" he asked, using his normal speaking voice.

At first I couldn't remember what the problem was. That was how it was when I got upset about something. I'd get myself all worked up, and then I'd remember other things that had happened in the past to upset me. Meredith telling me to stand outside in the cold for twenty minutes because I wrote on the walls in red crayon. Bill yelling because his eggs were too runny. Johnny Z disappearing for long stretches of time. It was as if my brain just froze up, leaving me speechless and weak.

"Ricky," I finally said.

"What'd Ricky do?"

"He made me eat dry cat food."

Grandpa Ted didn't look nearly as surprised as I'd expected. "Just now?"

I nodded, crossing my arms. I buried my head in Grandpa's elbow.

Grandpa scratched his head. "Well, where'd he get cat food from? We don't have a cat here."

"Brought it with him. Brought it in his birdies hat." I meant his Cardinals hat, but I couldn't think of the word.

Grandpa Ted nodded. "It's okay, Duncan. I'll take care of this."

I frowned.

"A-do you-a believe-a me, boss?" he said in the Italian accent.

I tried not to laugh, but I didn't quite make it.

"Where's your brother at anyway?" he asked, back to his normal voice.

I pointed to the front window. Through it we could see Ricky sitting on the ground, contentedly playing with his G.I. Joes.

"I'll be right back." Grandpa stood, still holding me, and then set me down in his favorite chair by myself. He walked out of the room. I watched TV. Gilligan was trying not to tell Ginger something but then she kissed him and he fainted. I laughed; Gilligan was so silly. From the bedroom I heard only silence; Grandma Lucy must have fallen asleep, and maybe Rhiannon too.

The next time I glanced out the window I could see Grandpa Ted outside, pacing slowly toward Ricky, carrying something. My brother wouldn't look at him, perhaps sensing he was in trouble. Grandpa Ted bent over and stretched out his palm so Ricky could see what was in his hand. Ricky squirmed, trying to get away, but Grandpa grabbed him by the sleeve with his left hand and put his right hand up to Ricky's mouth. They struggled for several seconds; then Ricky opened his mouth, and Grandpa fed him several small pieces of Meow Mix. My brother scowled, but he managed to chew and swallow the cat food, just as I had. The look on his face told me he didn't appreciate the taste any more than I did.

Moments later Grandpa Ted came back in, and I climbed down from his favorite chair so he could sit in it. He picked me up, set me back down on his lap again. I could see Ricky through the window, staring at the ground, trying to break one of his G.I. Joes in half with his bare hands. I don't think he ever managed to do it.

Ziploc and Velcro

The playground was a scary place on the first day of school. I knew some of the faces around me, but not enough to make me feel comfortable in this strange world I was entering. A dog barked from down the street. A girl standing near me kept smacking her doll against the brick wall. The other kids looked either restless, frightened, or both. I wanted to go back to kindergarten, where I knew all the letter people and the scissors weren't sharp enough to draw blood.

I was little for my age. I'd known how to read since before kindergarten, but I still didn't know how to tie my shoes. Rhiannon taught me how to read; Meredith kept saying she'd teach me how to tie my shoes but never got around to it so she bought Velcro-strapped shoes. Velcro fit together.

I thought about the letter people and how they fit together to form words. Matt Schultz and I used to carry the letter people around the kindergarten room, stomping our feet like soldiers in one of Bill's war movies. I carried Mr. D because that was the first letter in my name. Matt carried Miss A because he didn't like Mr. M. It was around that time that I first made up the world of the robots and started telling Matt stories about it. He liked my stories.

I didn't see him anywhere. I hoped he'd be in my class again.

Darrell Boatman sat at the desk in front of me. In my head I called him Blubber Butt because he wore pants that were too loose and his butt crack had a tendency to

show. Blubber Butt smelled like rotten apples. Something always seemed to be moving in his greasy hair.

The teacher was a heavyset, wrinkly lady named Mrs. Bradley. She didn't stand up when she taught but her eyebrows moved up and down a lot. I could hear birds chirping from outside but they were hard to hear because her voice was so loud. I liked it better when Rhiannon taught me; she had a softer, prettier voice. Rhiannon was in the same school building as me, but she was in one of the fifth-grade classrooms, on the second floor.

Behind me sat Doug Fry, a redheaded pudgy kid who breathed almost as loud as Mrs. Bradley spoke. Doug seemed to be perpetually gasping for air. That first day alone he fell asleep three or four times during class. Each time Mrs. Bradley woke him up he'd say something like, "I go see my Gramps and he watches Johnny Carson and laughs and I can't sleep then." His face turned red every time.

The lunchroom was like a maze of big kids endlessly throwing mashed potatoes at each other. The only person I saw that I knew was Blubber Butt, and I refused to sit down next to him because he smelled. I opened my Star Wars lunchbox. Meredith had packed a bologna sandwich with cheese and mustard. There was also a small box of raisins, a Thermos of milk, and a Ziploc bag of plain potato chips. Ziploc fit together. The bread from the sandwich was squishy between my tongue and the roof of my mouth. I turned eating into a game. If I could eat my sandwich in fifteen bites or less, I'd win. If not, I'd lose. Bite by bite. I finished in thirteen bites, but that was an unlucky number so I knocked once on the table to make up for it because that was in the rules of the game.

I loved playing games.

At recess I played by myself. The other kids ran, jumped, slid, threw a big red rubber ball back and forth. The girls played house and the boys pretended to wrestle. I

sat on the ground next to the monkey bars, watching. I tried to think of something fun to do.

Matt Schultz was walking past the teeter-totters. He was taller than me, and he didn't so much walk as stroll, even almost glide, as if he was in complete control of his surroundings and was unashamed of anything. I waved at him; he waved back, but I didn't go over there. He was talking to a girl with shoulder-length blond hair who giggled at everything he said. I took a few steps and stopped next to the slide.

I could make something up. I was good at that.

The area underneath the slide could be a large doorway to the world of the robots. The robots needed my help. One of them had gone berserk and was beating the others up. I was the only one who knew, the only one who could remove the berserk robot's batteries and save the robot population. I'd be a hero.

All around me, kids ran back and forth, hollering and laughing, but I paid no attention to them. They climbed up and slid down, climbed up and slid down, but none of them ran through the doorway to the robot world. It was a good thing because nobody knew as much about that secret world as I did. After all, the creator of a world has to know a little something about his creations. I knew that the berserk robot (who would have a name like AR-13175) was setting fires, trying to damage the city I'd envisioned. I couldn't let him.

Something smelled like rotten apples.

Then I was on the pavement, wriggling, struggling to get back on my feet. Someone held me down, but I couldn't see who it was because there was an armpit in my face. The armpit's owner laughed, proud of himself for knocking me down. I pushed his arm out of the way; it was Blubber Butt.

My knee hurt. My elbow had a big red bump on it. My hands were skinned up from the pavement. I pushed Blubber Butt off me (sort of; he outweighed me by a good forty pounds) and tried to stand.

"Hey, kid, you ain't gettin away from me!" Blubber Butt swung his fist, hit me medium-hard in the chest. "I just knocked you down! When I knock you down you stay there, butt-plug! Hey Jimmy, come here!"

His friend ran over from the swings; Jimmy was taller than Blubber Butt, and a lot skinnier. Both of them started kicking me and shoving me down again. Mrs. Bradley, the teacher on recess duty, glanced over from her standing position by the doors to the school. She turned away to watch a group of girls playing with their dolls.

"This kid's too weak to be here," said Jimmy. "My Dad says you gotta be a man. This kid's a weak little boy."

"He sits behind me and taps on his desk a lot. Jimmy, this is Wuss. Wuss, Jimmy. I'm gonna bop 'im on the head, Jimmy."

"Cool!" Jimmy said, belting me in the stomach. *If I puke up my bologna sandwich, I thought, it's going all over these kids.*

Blubber Butt and Jimmy laughed as they twisted my body into new and unique shapes. They stopped when Matt Schultz ran over from the slide and screamed in Blubber Butt's face. I couldn't tell what he said because the words were too fast, but I knew he was sticking up for me.

"Schultz, I'll kick you in the willy-worm!" Jimmy said, grabbing Matt's shirt. They started fighting. I tried to get loose so I could help Matt, but Blubber Butt kept picking me up and dropping me. It hurt. It was a game to Blubber Butt. Evidently it was a game to Mrs. Bradley as well, because she didn't do anything about it. A bunch of kids were watching; Doug Fry yelled, "Leave Duncan alone!"

Then Rhiannon was there, pulling Blubber Butt off me, calling him names I'd have been spanked for saying. And at that point Mrs. Bradley finally decided to enter the proceedings, hands on hips as she walked toward us.

"Don't worry about us, Mrs. Batshit, you just stand there," Rhiannon said in a calm, but far from soothing, voice.

"Young woman, excuse you please!" Mrs. Bradley snapped. I wondered, briefly, how long it would take to count all the wrinkles in her face. You'd probably have had to be a robot to count that high. "Perhaps you'd like to go to Mr. Whitman's office and get some Dial to wash your mouth out with. He keeps it in his desk for ugly-mouthed children like you."

"You can't talk to me that way," Rhiannon said. "You're the first-grade teacher. I'm in fifth. So do your job."

"This *is* my job. You're disrupting my recess."

Rhiannon's eyes narrowed; her head tilted. "Hmm, disrupting. Let's see. I look out the window during science to see if I can see my brother. I see these little bastards throwing him all over the playground. I run down to stop it. Yeah, sorry to disrupt."

"Um, I wasn't doing it," Matt said. "I was helping Duncan."

Rhiannon grinned at him, just slightly.

Mrs. Bradley blinked several times. "Matthew--"

"Call me Schultz," he said. "It ain't cool what they were doing--"

"Matthew! Be quiet! Rhiannon, I will not put up with you or your foul street-gutter language," she said. "If I wanted to sit and listen to uneducated hoodlum speech like that, I'd find a men's locker room after a basketball game."

Blubber Butt and Jimmy scowled at Rhiannon. Matt Schultz watched every move she made.

I stared at the slide, searching for the doorway leading to the world I'd created. I couldn't see it.

"We'll get your mother here in just a few minutes. *Both* of your parents will be here if Mr. Whitman can get in touch with your father at work--"

My invisible, secret world. If I could get there, nobody would throw me on the ground.

"Mr. Whitman can kiss my butt. He made me write a hundred sentences just because I ran in the hallway last year--"

In my world everybody would be rich and they'd all go around eating jelly beans all day--

--you insolent, good-for-nothing little--"

The robots needed their creator.

"Fine, let's go. Come on, Duncan. Duncan, what are you looking at? Look at me." She gently moved my chin until I was looking in her direction. "We have to go in and talk to the principal now."

"But I'm trying to see the--"

She put a hand against my back and guided me toward the doors of the red-brick school building. Mrs. Bradley knocked on a classroom window and beckoned a young male teacher outside to watch the other kids while we all went inside. Nobody looked happy. I looked at the slide once more before we went in, and there, *there it was*, the doorway leading to the world of the robots, yeah, I saw it, it was all mine, they couldn't take it away, nobody could, not Blubber Butt or Jimmy or Mrs. Bradley, it was my very own invisible world, it was *Duncanworld*--

"Stop tripping on your feet, you dumb dick," Blubber Butt muttered.

I bent over and fastened the Velcro on my left shoe. It fit just like the doorway under the slide. All mine. It was Duncanworld. It was a part of me.

Batty

Most of what I remember about first grade is being sent to the principal's office, which is a bit strange since it only happened three times that year. The first was when Mrs. Bradley went "batshit" (Rhiannon's word) and escorted me there along with the bullies who were attacking me, the friend who'd literally jumped into the fight, and the sister who'd verbally defended me against my own teacher. Mrs. Bradley seemed to have no problem with Blubber Butt and Jimmy declaring war on me for no particular reason, but when the sides became evenly matched she finally chose to become involved.

Mr. Whitman, the principal, listened to Mrs. Bradley's description of the story, which somehow put Blubber Butt and Jimmy in a more-or-less favorable light: "Boys will be boys, but they do not need interference from some snotty, disrespectful fifth-grade girl who should know better." At this Rhiannon (with much obvious difficulty) held her tongue.

At that point Mr. Whitman gave Blubber Butt the floor. This was an optimistic move, as Blubber Butt's own account consisted mainly of "I dunno" and "uh-uh" and "this kid started it." Jimmy punctuated this last remark: "Yeah, he has to have his sister stop his fights."

Then Mr. Whitman looked at me. He said, "You look a little skinned-up, young man."

I nodded, wondering if being skinned-up was against the school rules.

"Darrell and Jimmy barely have a scratch on them. Unless you count a scar on Jimmy's nose that appears to have been there a long time."

"My knee hurts," I said. "The pavement scraped it."

"Did you get any good hits in?" Mr. Whitman said with a wink.

"No," I said.

"I did," said Schultz, obviously proud of himself. "I was mad 'cause they were two against one."

Mr. Whitman cleared his throat. I stared for a moment at the ceiling light reflecting off his head.

"Mrs. Bradley, you were absolutely right. Boys will be boys. It's the first day of school. And I'm willing to avoid making a giant issue of this, as it's first offense for everyone."

"Not everyone," said Mrs. Bradley, motioning in Rhiannon's direction.

"Rhiannon appears to have been defending her brother. That's what Jimmy just said. She was stopping the fight. I did the same thing for my little brothers several times."

"Damn straight," Rhiannon said.

"She'll need to watch her language though. Mrs. Bradley, I thank you for bringing this incident to my attention. Hopefully we've all learned something here. Hopefully I won't have to see any of you back in here."

Mrs. Bradley crossed her arms, but did not protest the lack of punishment. She simply said, "You heard what Mr. Whitman said. Back to where you're supposed to be, all of you."

Blubber Butt burped. He glared at me as we left the office. Rhiannon gently gave my arm a pinch as she headed off in the opposite direction to return to her science class. Schultz watched her go, then grinned at me.

The second time I was sent to the principal's office was in late November. It was one of those unseasonably warm days that always seem to occur just before the temperature plummets to below freezing. We'd had to stay in the gym for recess for the

past few weeks, but on this day the sun was shining and you could get by with a light jacket, so Mrs. Bradley showed a rare hint of generosity by allowing us to go outside. I sat underneath a tree.

“Duncan!”

I looked up from my notebook. It was Schultz and Doug Fry.

“What are you doing?” Doug asked.

“I’m drawing a robot,” I said.

My picture was really little more than a stick man in blue crayon with a square head and hands that had no discernible fingers, but Doug and Schultz looked impressed anyway.

“Did the robots stop that other robot that wanted to take ‘em over?” Schultz asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. But now they don’t know who their king’s gonna be.”

Schultz grinned; Doug looked confused. I colored in my robot’s left eye.

“Come here,” said Schultz. “Put down your notebook a minute. Ain’t nobody gonna take it.”

I stood, setting the notebook down carefully against a tree root. The three of us walked over to the fence at the edge of the playground. Stacy Jones, a girl from Schultz’s class, giggled the instant she saw him. He whispered something in her ear; she giggled again. “Okay,” she whispered loudly. He kissed her on the lips.

“You’re a good kisser, Stacy,” he said to her.

“Thank you,” she said, giggling.

“Now you get to kiss her,” Schultz said to me.

“Huh?”

“You can kiss her now.”

I was confused. If Schultz liked this girl, why did he want me to give her a kiss?

“It’s okay,” said Stacy. “I’ll let you.”

I hesitated. "I don't want anybody to see."

Schultz picked up Stacy's doll blanket. "Put this over your heads when you do it. Then they won't see."

Stacy smiled at me. I liked the way her pretty blue eyes crinkled up when she smiled.

We put the blanket over our heads. My lips touched hers for about a half second, then the kiss was over.

Schultz pulled the blanket off our heads. "Is she a good kisser, Duncan?"

I shrugged. "Yeah."

Stacy giggled.

"You wanna kiss her, Doug?" Schultz asked.

"Nah. Duncan can take my turn."

I felt more courageous this time; I didn't even insist that we use the blanket. It was a slightly longer kiss, but more to the corner of her mouth than the first one.

"You're pretty," I said to her.

"What is going on here?!?" Mrs. Bradley snapped, grabbing both of us by the arms. "Public displays of affection, we can't have that. Let's go."

"I didn't even see her coming," Schultz whispered to Doug, as Mrs. Bradley marched Stacy and me in to the principal's office.

This time Mr. Whitman's suit was gray instead of navy blue, but I was pretty sure he was wearing the same tie. He frowned when he saw us walk in.

"These children were *kissing*," Mrs. Bradley said simply, crossing her arms.

Mr. Whitman nodded, a thoughtful expression on his face. I saw Stacy staring at him, and I wondered if it was his bald head she was staring at.

"This is an interesting situation," Mr. Whitman finally said. "What do you suggest we do with them? Should we, hmm, let's see, should we make them stay after school until eight o'clock tonight? That might teach them a lesson."

Stacy gasped; I tried to pretend I didn't care either way.

"It isn't a laughing matter, Mr. Whitman," said Mrs. Bradley. "Duncan and Stacy were kissing. Right in front of everyone."

"Better to be kissing than punching," said Mr. Whitman. He seemed to recognize me for the first time. "Duncan, you're back. You weren't going to be back, were you?"

I shook my head.

"Are you sorry for what you did?"

I shook my head again.

He looked at Stacy. "Well, are you sorry for what you did?"

Stacy said, "Yeah."

Mr. Whitman looked back at me. "Ooh, tough break, Duncan. There'll be other fish in the sea. Just don't forget to bring some worms along."

I laughed.

Mrs. Bradley blinked at him several times, unwilling or unable to speak.

Mr. Whitman dismissed us from his office. Stacy and I followed Mrs. Bradley back to the playground. As soon as Mrs. Bradley's back was turned, Stacy kissed me once more, then got in line to play four-square.

The third time I was sent to the principal's office was the following March. Meredith and Bill had been fighting the night before; it seemed to be happening increasingly more often. I couldn't sleep because their voices were so loud. As a result I felt like a half-demented zombie when Meredith dropped me off at school.

It was story time, somewhere in the middle of the morning. Except for Mrs. Bradley's articulate storytelling voice, the room was silent. Just as she stopped speaking

to turn a page of *Charlotte's Web*, Doug Fry farted. It was so loud I suspected that, had Mrs. Bradley been reading aloud at that moment, she'd have been drowned out.

We all laughed; I stopped laughing when I turned around and saw how embarrassed Doug was. He was a pretty shy kid, self-conscious about everything from his weight to the freckles on his face to his tendency to fall asleep in the classroom.

The laughter (some of it behind hands, but most of it loud and outwardly mocking) continued, until Mrs. Bradley said: "Douglas, excuse you please. Control yourself."

She picked the story up where she'd left off, her eyebrows rising and falling with great intensity as she read to us.

Several kids were still laughing, muttering to one another about how incredibly funny the sound of Doug's fart had been. From behind me I heard Doug shifting around in his seat, trying to hide without drawing further attention to himself.

Mrs. Bradley interrupted herself in mid-sentence to say, "Now look at the disturbance you've caused, Douglas."

"Batty Batshit," I said.

The laughter shifted its focus; now it was centered on me. The other kids were genuinely surprised, most of them even delighted to hear our teacher insulted in the classroom. Nobody was more surprised than I was; I didn't mean to say it out loud.

Mrs. Bradley slammed the book down on her desk. She stood up. "Young man, you will report to Mr. Whitman's office *immediately*."

Blubber Butt craned his neck to look at me, his face showing a newly-found respect. I got up out of my chair and walked past Doug, whose face was still red from his own humiliating outburst. I walked past the rest of the students, and out the classroom door and down the hall.

Mr. Whitman's office door was open, but he was busy talking to his secretary about the play the sixth-graders were putting on that week. I walked in and sat down in the chair just inside.

"Hello, Duncan," he said. "Do you need something?"

I was pretty sure I was supposed to tell him myself what had happened. It was difficult to find the words; I sat there staring at him, unable to speak.

"Duncan, were you sent down here to talk to me?" Mr. Whitman asked. I watched the light reflect off his bald spot. He'd been nice to me before when I'd been sent to his office; he'd probably understand my point of view.

"Miss Bradley's a Batty Batshit," I said.

Mr. Whitman's right eye twitched. He cleared his throat.

"You will sit there in perfect silence," Mrs. Bradley said. Through the window behind her I could see a bus pull away from the curb. I wondered if I was going to miss supper. Ricky would probably eat my share before I could claim it myself.

I opened my notebook to draw some pictures.

"You will give me the notebook. You are being punished."

Slowly I stood up, walked to the front of the classroom, and handed her my notebook. She accepted it with a curt nod, then gestured for me to return to my seat near the back of the room.

Batty, I thought.

Nim Rainer and the Chicken Pox

At first I didn't like her. Her house was on the way to school. Nim Rainer had a way of suddenly appearing next to me or behind me, and suddenly there was nothing I could do to get away from her. I could never find the words to tell her I wanted to walk to school alone, and for some reason it never occurred to me to just find a different route. She moved to Bentleyville during the last weeks of first grade, a short, skinny girl with medium-brown hair which always seemed to be obstructing her green eyes no matter how often she swept it back out of her face.

Nim ended up in my second-grade class, and she sat in front of me and helped me with my math homework when I was stuck. Schultz liked her too, but that was no surprise because he liked all the girls. Nim's real name was Naomi, but to me she was always Nim.

She read a story I'd written for class about dragons; she said she loved it. That was when I decided she was all right. I wrote her a story about a dragon that also happened to be a robot. She told me later that her mother read it and thought it was great. Nim's mom became the town librarian that year. She looked pretty much like an older version of Nim, only with much shorter hair. One day she caught Schultz in the library, looking at one of his older brother Sam's books about sex. Miss Rainer told Schultz he shouldn't bring the book with him to school, but she never told anyone else he had it. That was when I decided *she* was all right, too.

My family went to church most Sundays. Bill usually stayed home because he hated God, but Meredith took Ricky and Rhiannon and me almost every single week. I went to Sunday school instead of regular church. On the Sunday after Nim got the chicken pox, Taylor Ellis sat by me. He was the Preacher's son. He wore glasses that had such thick lenses that I felt sick just being in the same room with him.

Taylor said, "Do you read your Bible?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Every day?"

"No, just when I have to." I didn't want to tell him I didn't understand most of it.

Taylor nodded; he sighed. "You gotta read it. People do bad stuff, and if they read the Bible then maybe they wouldn't do that."

"Nim has the chicken pox," I said, just to change the subject.

"Oh. Is she sad about it?"

I shook my head. "It's not that big a deal. I had it before. You miss school and you can watch TV all day. It just itches, is all."

Taylor was playing with his shoestrings and not listening to me, so I stopped talking. I wanted to go upstairs to the regular church and sit by Rhiannon because she was a lot cooler than Taylor. I asked Shelly, the Sunday-school teacher, but she wouldn't let me. She made us read Bible verses and sing Bible songs; Taylor looked extremely pleased. I thought of a good dragon story for Nim, but when I tried to write it down Shelly told me to pay attention.

After church Meredith talked to the Ellises for a long time. Ricky and Rhiannon stood there with them, pretending to be interested in what they were saying. Preacher Ellis spoke nearly as loudly in this conversation as he did whenever he was in front of the congregation. I played a game where I tried to see how fast I could scoot my body underneath all the pews on the lefthand side of the church. I never found out how fast because Rhiannon saw me and made me stop.

Taylor ran over to his father; Preacher Ellis picked him up and swung him around in the air for a few seconds, then set him back down. "My land, son, you're getting heavy! Did you have fun today?"

"Yeah," said Taylor, pushing his glasses upward on the bridge of his nose. "We learned about Abraham and him having a son when he was real old."

"That's right," said the Preacher, winking at his wife. Mrs. Ellis smiled, looking back and forth through the church as if she were trying to find somebody else to talk about. The Preacher said, "That shows that he had faith, do you know that?"

Taylor nodded. "Duncan doesn't read his Bible much."

Everyone looked at me, probably to see what I would say. I shrugged and said nothing.

"Well, maybe he will someday, son," said the Preacher.

"Yeah. Hmm. Maybe." Taylor looked skeptical at the prospect.

Ricky spoke up. "Meredith, when are we leaving? I have stuff to do today."

Meredith glanced at Mrs. Ellis, an apologetic look on her face. "Ricky, if it's so urgent for you to get home at a certain time, you can walk home, if it's that important."

"Okay," said Ricky. He darted out of the room, heading for the double doors.

Meredith shrugged. "Rhiannon, Duncan, you might as well go with him."

"Okay," said Rhiannon.

"I read it sometimes," I said, looking at the Preacher. He smiled and winked again, this time at me.

It took us about ten minutes to walk home. The air was chilly. I kicked the brown and orange leaves around. When we got home Bill was lying down on the couch, watching football and finishing off a beer. He set the empty can next to two others on the coffee table.

"Hey, Bill," said Ricky. "You missed a killer service."

Bill addressed him while still staring at the TV. "Since when do you care what the hell goes on at church?"

"I don't know. I fell asleep. It killed me so much I couldn't stay awake. Can I have a beer?"

Bill scoffed. "You couldn't hold it down."

"Yeah, I could."

Rhiannon was already in the kitchen, taking hamburger meat out of the fridge to cook dinner for everyone. I took off my jacket and started for my room, thinking about the new dragon story I was going to write.

"Duncan," Bill said, "your friend Tim called."

"You mean Nim?" I said. "What did she want?"

Bill scoffed again. "I thought Tim was a little boy. Anyway, he or she or whoever said you're invited to go over there for lunch."

"Okay. Can, can I go?"

Bill stared at the screen, starting on his fourth beer.

"Can I?" I repeated.

"I don't give a shit."

The game went to a commercial.

I had to walk to Nim's. Her house was only about a block away, so I didn't even bother to put my jacket back on. I kicked more leaves. I walked right past a rabbit and it didn't even move. As I stepped into the Rainers' back yard, their dog Casey met me; he growled, then remembered who I was. I scratched the top of his nose with my thumb. His tail danced.

Nim stepped out onto the porch before I could even knock. She was wearing a black T-shirt and red sweat pants. I could tell right away that she had a pretty heavy case of the chicken pox. I wondered if they were all over her body, but I didn't ask because the

question had to do with Nim being naked and Meredith had told me before that I shouldn't talk about people being naked.

"I have a great idea," Nim said. "My Mom went to get groceries, so she won't be back for a while. We should go to the alley behind Mr. Skordos's house. We can be spies and hide and watch people go by and see what they're doing without anybody knowing we're even there."

"Wait, but you can't go there. You're sick."

"Yeah," she said, "sick of being cooped up in this place for the last week. It'll be okay. We won't be gone long, and then we'll come back and eat tomato soup." She started to scratch her arm, then stopped herself.

I agreed. I'd never played spies before; it could be fun. And maybe Mr. Skordos would see us out there and bring us sugar cookies. He owned Nikolai's Cafe, the restaurant next to the gas station. He was about thirty, and he had thick, bushy eyebrows. About twice a week my family would stop in for supper, and Mr. Skordos would always take thirty percent off our total bill because he said we were such good customers. He'd call Meredith and Rhiannon beautiful ladies, and he'd even bow to them sometimes; then he'd pat me on the shoulder and tell me I was growing like a maple tree. Sometimes I watched him with other families, and he typically didn't treat them as well.

Nim and I hid behind the shrubbery across the alley from Mr. Skordos's house. I thought we should have binoculars or a magnifying glass, but she said not to worry about it. Nim squirmed, complaining that her chicken pox itched.

At first all we got to spy on were two cats and a little girl walking a beagle. Nothing exciting was happening. Then, about ten minutes after we started spying, Meredith's car pulled up in Mr. Skordos's yard.

"What's your mom doing here?" Nim asked.

From our hiding place across the alley we watched as Meredith got out of the car, walked up to the door, turned one of her keys in the lock, and stepped right in as if she owned the house. The door closed behind her.

Nim drew a sharp breath. "Duncan, do you think they're maybe stealing stuff, and that's their secret hideout?"

"My mom wouldn't do that," I said.

"Mine would," said Nim, "if there was a *lot* of stuff to steal."

We sat there for a few moments, staring at the house, afraid to speak despite there being nobody within earshot.

"Hey Duncan?" Nim said. "Let's just go up and look in the windows for a minute."

"No way! We'll get caught and we'll get in trouble."

"Not if they don't see us. If we *act* like good spies, then we *are* good spies. We'll just peek in that window right there; that's the living room, I think. If they did steal something, it's bound to be in there! We'll just look real fast and then go."

"But they might see us anyway."

Nim put a hand on my elbow. "If you get in trouble by your mom, just come over to my house. My mom likes you."

So we headed around to the side of the house, Nim wiggling back and forth as if trying to telepathically will her itching to stop, me following close behind. We weren't going to see a thing, just a regular living room. Then we'd both feel dumb, but we'd feel dumb together so it would be okay.

Nim looked in first. I stood behind her. She closed her eyes, put her hands over them.

"What? What's the matter?"

She turned. "You don't want to look in there, Duncan."

"You just said we should look in--"

“No.”

I froze. Maybe she'd been right; maybe Mr. Skordos and Meredith *had* stolen a lot of things. In my mind's eye I pictured trunks upon trunks of gold and silver and diamonds littering the Skordos living room. Meredith would go to jail, and then Rhiannon and I would be stuck with Bill and Ricky. At least occasionally Meredith was nice to us, but Bill yelled at us and Ricky made hell out of our lives. We'd never manage--

I looked in.

Ricky and his friends liked to talk about sex a lot. He used to claim he'd had sex with six different girls from his class, but Rhiannon said he probably hadn't because he was only twelve years old. Schultz's brother gave him books to read about sex, and also occasionally showed us pictures of naked women eating bananas and grapes. I knew about sex but I didn't know a married person could do it to someone she wasn't married to.

Meredith looked like she was in pain. Then she looked up at Mr. Skordos on top of her and smiled. Mr. Skordos leaned down and kissed her shoulder. They were on the floor, their clothes in one big pile beside the sofa.

I moved away from the window. Nim followed me. She put her arm around me as we walked. I didn't worry about her chicken pox because I'd already had them.

That night I wrote down the dragon story for her. She was still out of school, so I took it to her the next afternoon along with her homework. She laughed when she read it so I figured she must like it. That same week I wrote a pirate story for Schultz, then a robot story for myself. I wrote and wrote. I wanted to rewrite everything.

The Cousin From Hell

“Maybe she’s not so bad now,” Rhiannon said.

Ricky closed the door to Rhiannon’s bedroom so Bill and Meredith wouldn’t hear. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Last time she stayed here she was an insufferable little twit. And that was only for one night. She’s gonna be here for a whole week.”

“What did she do?” I asked. It had been a couple of years; I couldn’t remember her at all.

“She broke his radio,” said Rhiannon.

“My brand-new radio! I got it for Christmas and she broke it three days later. I hate her!”

“We have to put up with her. So let’s just suck it up. Okay?”

Ricky smirked. “Meredith said you have to share your bed.”

“I what? Why can’t she sleep on the couch? Or take Duncan’s bed and he sleep on the couch?”

“Meredith said it made the most sense. She said the twit likes you. Plus you know Meredith’s been sleeping on the couch ‘cause it’s better for her back.”

“And that doesn’t make sense at all,” Rhiannon said, straightening the books on her shelf. “That couch is the lumpiest piece of crap I’ve ever sat on. She’s just pissed off at Bill ‘cause he got her pregnant.”

My mother was about five months along when my cousin Lanie came to visit from Crawford, a hundred miles away. I was seven years old, but I already knew how babies were conceived. I liked the idea of being a big brother to someone, but there was more to

it than that. Once or twice I heard my father refer to getting drunk and making a fourth child, but I knew there was a good chance he hadn't even been there to make this one. Ricky and Rhiannon did not know; I had no idea how to tell them what I'd seen.

My Uncle Everett's voice filled the living room: "Bill, I can't tell you how glad I am you're taking the little turdbird off my hands for a few days! Monica's been wanting to go to Florida for years."

"Not a problem, Ev," said Bill. "One more mouth, no big deal. And she gets along pretty well with the kids."

"I hate her!" Ricky said again; Rhiannon pushed him out of her bedroom so we could greet my cousin.

The moment I saw her, I had an abrupt flash, a long-hidden memory from what must have been Lanie's previous visit: She'd poured a glass of water on Rhiannon's cat Snuffles. I remembered her hideously uneven teeth, her stringy hair, her strange odor that for some reason I associated with mud puddles. And, aside from the braces on her teeth, she looked exactly the same as she had back then. Then I recalled that she'd also picked me up and dropped me on my butt on the kitchen floor. At the time I'd been five and she'd been eight, but it was her apparent intention to treat me as a baby and herself as the mother (and a very clumsy one at that).

I turned to run; Rhiannon caught me before I could escape.

Lanie had a bizarre way of staring at everyone, much like people in paintings whose eyes follow you no matter where you go in the room. She said, "I'll have lots of fun here. I did last time. I did puzzles and I ran races in the backyard." She set down her suitcase. Uncle Everett handed her a very new-looking Nancy Drew hardback, the pages of which she immediately began to flip back and forth randomly.

Rhiannon nodded to her. "Hi, Lanie."

"I get to sleep in your room!" Lanie said. "I can't wait. It's gonna be cool."

Bill sat down on the couch next to Meredith, who winced at his very presence. He said, "Now don't give us any trouble, Lanie, or we'll put you in the basement. And it's not finished."

"Don't listen to him," said Meredith. "He's just kidding. Bill, you're just kidding."

Uncle Everett laughed. I'd always liked him before; now I was mad at him for saddling us with his daughter for the next seven days. He looked at me. "You're getting big fast, Duncan," he said.

"Not fast enough for my preference," said Bill.

"Bill," said Meredith.

Uncle Everett laughed again, scratching his balding head. He was nearly as bald as Mr. Whitman at school. I wondered how Bill had managed to hold onto all of his hair but his brother, who was only a year older, had come up snake-eyes on the deal.

They spent the next few minutes discussing their only other sibling, my Aunt Nora, who Uncle Everett called "pleasantly plump" and my father called "beached whale." Lanie asked Meredith to make her a peanut-butter sandwich. Meredith pointed to Rhiannon, then to the kitchen; Rhiannon scowled and left the room.

Suddenly Lanie looked at me as if she hadn't seen me come in. "Hi, little baby!" she said in a gushing voice. For a moment the braces over her misshapen grin seemed to fill the entire room.

"Your mom got fat," said Lanie.

"She's pregnant," Ricky said through a heaping mouthful of corn chips.

Lanie sucked in a sharp breath. "That means Duncan won't be the baby anymore! That's okay, Duncan, you'll still be the baby to me. You're so cute!"

"I bet that's the last girl that calls you cute for a long time, dungball," Ricky said to me.

"Dungball," said Lanie. "Is that like turdbird?"

"My name's Duncan," I said to my brother, as if he didn't already know.

"*Duncan*. Not dungball."

"Of course your name's Duncan, sweet little baby!" Lanie gushed. She jumped down from her chair in the kitchen and clomped over to mine.

"Don't pick me--"

And then I was in the air, being carted around the kitchen by the cousin from Hell, who smelled just as strong and as foul as ever. Rhiannon came back in from the bathroom at that moment and ran over to us; Lanie turned and tried to throw me to her. I landed in a heap on the linoleum, thinking I'd almost rather spend the week with Blubber Butt than with Lanie.

Rhiannon asked quickly if I was all right, and before I could answer she turned back to Lanie: "Listen, he's not a baby, he's seven years old. He doesn't need to be carried all over the house like an infant kangaroo or something."

Lanie sucked in her breath again. "Ooh, a baby kangaroo! That's what he can be. My little baby kangaroo."

"That'll work," said Ricky. "He looks more kangaroo than human."

"What's going on in here?" Bill was standing in the doorway leading to the living room.

"Lanie threw me on the floor," I said, trying to look as pathetic as possible.

"Well, you're upsetting your mother with all that noise."

He went back to the living room.

"No respect at all," said Ricky, his voice cracking as he tried unsuccessfully to sound like Rodney Dangerfield.

"Lanie, what are you doing?!?" Rhiannon said. My cousin was leaning forward on her chair, smearing her sandwich back and forth on the table. Peanut butter tracks made circles across its surface.

"Meredith's going to kill us all," Rhiannon said.

"Not if you clean it up," said Lanie, running to the bathroom.

My sister stared at the spot where Lanie had been sitting, then at the mess my cousin had left her.

"Hate her yet?" Ricky asked.

Rhiannon breathed in, then out, slowly. "This is war," she said.

The only peace any of us got that first night was within the few moments here and there when Lanie decided she wanted to read Nancy Drew. We pretended she wasn't there; we played Yahtzee in the living room; we smiled and laughed. But it was never long before Lanie started wondering where we were, what we were doing, and how much she could bother us. She insisted on helping me play. I played a worse hand with her help than without. Finally she grabbed the dice and ran for Rhiannon's bedroom, locking herself inside and us out.

"What the hell was that?!?" Ricky said.

"Richard William Pierce, language!" Meredith yelled from the couch.

"Meredith, Lanie locked me out of my own room," Rhiannon said with a nonchalant shrug of the shoulders.

"Play nice," said Meredith.

Rhiannon knocked on her bedroom door. "Lanie! Lanie, I need your help with something. Come out here please."

Silence from the other side of the door.

"It's really important. So are you coming out?"

Lanie's voice: "I want the baby to give his favorite cousin a kiss."

"I don't want to kiss her," I whispered to Rhiannon. "She smells bad."

Rhiannon said, "Lanie, the *baby* isn't born yet. Duncan's seven years old. I already told you that."

Lanie's voice: "What?"

Rhiannon sighed--or was it a growl? "Lanie. You heard what I said. Now come out here."

Lanie's voice: "Don't have to. Want Duncan to give me a kiss."

The only girl I'd kissed at this point was Stacy Jones, and I'd enjoyed it a lot. But there was a lot of difference between Stacy and Lanie. Stacy had never thrown me across the kitchen, for instance.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "No!"

"Calm down, Duncan," said Rhiannon. "You don't have to kiss Lanie."

"Well, I ain't kissing her," said Ricky.

"Nobody's kissing anybody."

From the rocking chair, Bill made a noise that sounded vaguely like a snort. He stared at Meredith, who watched TV and didn't seem to notice he was in the room.

Then we heard a tearing noise from the other side of the door, and Lanie threw the door open and ran for the bathroom again.

Rhiannon stormed into her room. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me!"

Ricky and I followed her. We saw her holding the Raggedy Ann doll she'd had since before I was born. The head had been ripped clean from the rest of the doll's body.

"Bill!" Rhiannon yelled.

My father stepped into her room, probably more out of a desire for actual conversation than out of parental responsibility.

"Look what Lanie did." By this point Rhiannon's face was crimson with fury.

"Hmm," said Bill, taking the pieces of the doll from Rhiannon. "Yes, it's definitely a decapitation, there's no doubt about it. Perhaps your mother would be willing to sew the head back on. You will have to ask her though, because she hates me with a passion she normally reserves for Uncle Jim when he owes us money."

"Maybe you could buy Rhiannon a new doll if Uncle Jim ever pays you back," Ricky said. He burped.

"That's not funny, ass--" Rhiannon stopped in mid-sentence. "Ask me why it's not funny."

"Why?"

"That's my doll from when I was a baby. Grandma Lucy gave me that the day I was born. Now look at it. I hate Lanie."

"We have a winner!" Ricky said.

I knew Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy's phone number. It had only five digits so it was easy to remember. I wasn't supposed to use the phone because when I was younger I liked calling people at random and asking them if they had their underwear on. But this was an emergency.

I went into the kitchen by myself and called the number, hoping nobody would catch me. Grandpa Ted answered; I explained the situation. He said he'd see what he could do. Then Ricky came in and I hung up on Grandpa.

"What are you doing, dungball?" Ricky said, his voice squeaking just a little.

"Talking to... to the phone," I said.

"Weirdo."

The next morning Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy paid us a surprise visit. It was Sunday; for once I was longing to go back to school so I could get away from Lanie for a few hours. I think Ricky felt the same way, and I know Rhiannon did.

It only took a few seconds for Grandma Lucy to give Rhiannon the new doll. Another Raggedy Ann, it wasn't *quite* the same as the original--it was a little bigger and quite a bit cleaner--but Rhiannon laughed and hugged Grandma Lucy with great affection.

"Well, we were just so sorry to hear what happened to the old one," Grandma said, her hands shaking as she reached out to hug Rhiannon again.

"How did you know about it?" Bill asked.

"Duncan called us," said Grandpa Ted. He adopted a flawless Cockney accent: "Ere! This young whippersnapper clued me in on what's goin' on 'round here. Lanie's been and gone to tearin' off doll heads 'round here, an' all."

I laughed, even though he'd just sold me out. Bill grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Um--" I tried to squirm out of my father's grasp, but it was just too strong.

"I told you not to use the telephone," said Bill. "Are you receiving me?"

Tears welled up in my eyes. "Yeah."

"You used the telephone--"

"Aw, pipe down, Billy," said Grandpa Ted. "Just because we didn't have a phone when you were a kid doesn't mean Duncan's got to be deprived of using it."

Bill closed his eyes, then opened them. "Dad, he makes embarrassing calls--"

"He won't do that anymore!" said Grandpa Ted, ruffling my hair. "He doesn't need to ask anybody else about their underwear, do you, Duncan?"

"No. I know they got 'em."

"There, you see?"

Bill glared at Grandpa, but said nothing. Rhiannon gave me a hug and thanked me for helping her get a new doll. Then she went into her bedroom and hid it so Lanie wouldn't find it.

That week I relished every minute of school, even my spelling test on Tuesday. I found excuses to walk home as slowly as possible; Nim kept trying to get me to speed up but I refused. Each evening was pure torture. On Sunday Lanie had overheard Rhiannon singing "Rainbow Connection" as requested by Grandma Lucy just before she went home. From that moment on Lanie made a point of proving to anyone within earshot that she could sing better than Rhiannon could (and her singing wasn't as awful as I'd have expected, but it was nowhere near the same league as Rhiannon's). The problem was that

the only song Lanie seemed to know was "Total Eclipse of the Heart," and when she sang it she would sway through the house, often knocking random objects over in her wake. If there was nobody else around to stop her, she would even grab my arms and dance me around dramatically as if we were ill-fated lovers on the dance floor for the final time. I endured it, but I didn't enjoy it.

Rhiannon had it worst: she had to share her bed with our cousin, who apparently tossed and turned and talked in her sleep, keeping my sister awake. This situation actually started off our side of the war against Lanie. Rhiannon decided that since she wasn't going to get any sleep the entire week anyway, she might as well find inventive ways of making sure Lanie didn't get any sleep either. About every ten or fifteen minutes during the night, Rhiannon would either give her a sharp kick or steal the sheets away or erupt into a mock-coughing fit; all of these things she did with her eyes closed, playing possum to make Lanie think it was all unintentional.

Schultz and Doug came over Wednesday evening after supper. They had heard me vent so much about Lanie that they just had to see her for themselves. They stepped into my room, where I was working on my math homework. Schultz was carrying a shoebox with him.

"It's my baseball cards," he said to me. "The box is almost full. If your mom has a boy, I want him to have half of these."

I was never much for questioning people's generosity--I'd usually even forget to thank them for it--and so I nodded and said, "Wait a minute. I have to do something."

I snuck down the hall and into Rhiannon's room; nobody was in there. I took Lanie's Nancy Drew book off the dresser and went back to join Doug and Schultz in my room. Doug closed the door once I was inside.

"Where's your cousin?" Doug asked. "I thought she'd be runnin' all over the place and settin' fire to stuff."

Carefully I tore a page from the book, just past Lanie's bookmark. I made a clean tear, just as Ricky had told me to do.

"What're you doing?" Schultz said. "Is that yours?"

I shook my head. "It's Lanie's. We're getting her back for being a stupid twit."

"Twit?"

"That's what Ricky calls her. I think he got that word from Grandpa Ted. That's what Grandpa calls other people driving on the road sometimes."

I tore another page, then another, making sure to flip a few pages each time so the missing portions were not consecutive. Schultz wanted to do it too, so I let him. Doug settled for ripping up the bookmark.

We'd just finished our project when Lanie stormed into my room. Schultz grabbed the book and shoved it underneath his jacket. Lanie walked right up to him and stared. I noticed she didn't smell as bad as usual; Meredith must have persuaded her to take a bath.

"You," said Lanie.

"Me what?" Schultz said.

"You're a cutie-pie. I like you. I want you to take me to a movie."

Schultz smirked. "What're we gonna go see?"

"Something with kissy people that kiss a lot!" Lanie laughed at her own joke.

Then she noticed Doug.

"You can go too," she said. "You can hold my popcorn."

"I ain't goin'," said Doug. "You guys go by yourself. I'll stay here with Duncan."

"How're we getting there?" Schultz asked my cousin.

"We'll fly. I always wanted to fly. And when we're in the air you'll give me a kiss."

"How old are you?"

"Ten."

Schultz said, "I don't think my mom's gonna let me go out with a ten-year-old since I just turned eight."

"You don't know how to fly either," I said to him.

"I want to fly!" Lanie said. She stomped on Schultz's right foot.

"That almost hurt," Schultz said. "You should, hey, know what you should do? You should fly to the movie first and wait for me, and I'll be there as soon as I'm done talking to Doug and Duncan. Ready? Go!"

Lanie frowned. "I don't like you now. You're not a cutie-pie. I was just making you feel better. But maybe I'll take this kid instead to the movie. He can't fly though because he's too fat."

Doug stared at the floor.

"That does it," Schultz said. "Get out of my sight."

"Get out of my room!" I said, and both of us pushed her into my bookcase. It shook back and forth; Archie comic books and Choose Your Own Adventures and notebooks I'd written stories in fell to the floor in a small scattered heap. Lanie opened the door and walked out, probably looking for Bill or Meredith so she could tell on me.

"That was great!" Schultz said, clapping me on the back.

"She called me fat," Doug said, still staring at the floor.

"Well, she's stupid," I said. "She shouldn't even be here."

Schultz gave me back Lanie's Nancy Drew book so I could smuggle it back into Rhiannon's room without being seen. We told jokes and made Doug feel better. Then Bill came in and said my friends had to go home and I had to stay in my room for the rest of the night because I'd made Lanie cry. Schultz and Doug left.

The rest of the week went pretty much like that, with my siblings and me doing things to irritate Lanie, and Lanie doing things to irritate us. She never mentioned the

missing pages from the book; I suspected this was because she was only pretending to read it.

Finally Friday night arrived, and we were facing the beginning of the end of that awful week with the cousin from Hell. Uncle Everett was picking her up the following morning. I hoped he was fully rested, prepared for the onslaught of overactive weirdness to resume.

Lanie was in high spirits that evening. Rhiannon's attempts at keeping her awake with rude noises and strong kicks had ceased to make a dent in Lanie's sleep patterns; apparently my cousin had become a sound sleeper during her stay. She certainly had far more energy than the rest of us put together (including my parents). She entertained herself by chasing Snuffles the cat back and forth across the house, tripping over the footstool approximately nine hundred times before supper.

Meredith called Ricky and me into the kitchen.

"Listen, kids," she said, "I'm trying to finish making supper. I can't concentrate with that girl tearing the hell out of the house. Take her outside or something."

"She won't go, I don't think," said Ricky.

My mother closed her eyes, opened them, stared at the ceiling for a few seconds before replying. "Why.. wouldn't... she go?"

"We don't like her," I blurted out.

Meredith opened the oven, checked the roast, closed the oven again. "She's going outside with you, and that's it." She was using her angry, hushed voice, the same one I'd heard Rhiannon use from time to time. "Your sister's got a headache. I don't want Lanie making it worse. You know how her voice carries."

"But what do we do with her?" Ricky asked. "What does she want to do?"

"Fly," I said.

"Yeah, that's pretty stupid, Duncan." He stood there for a few seconds, forehead creased. Then he grabbed my arm and the next thing I knew we were standing on the front porch with Lanie.

"--Now this is only about three feet off the ground, so you'll have to flap your arms fast. But if you remember to turn yourself around seven times for luck, you shouldn't have any problem, okay? I did it perfect, first try. Duncan did too."

"Um," I said. "Yeah."

"Told ya," said Ricky.

"Then I flew all the way uptown to the grocery store," I said, "and I flew in and bought all our food and milk and grape juice and apples. Then I flew to Mars--"

"Yeah, whatever," said Ricky. "Now do it, Lanie."

"Okay, I think I'm ready," Lanie said. "Just stand way over there. I want to swoop way out. I don't want to run into you. I want to fly all over the place, all by myself."

Ricky and I jogged all the way across the street, watching Lanie spin her body around in circles seven times. Ricky laughed, but not loud enough to be heard from that far away.

She made scissors motions with her arms, kept batting them up and down, and jumped.

Somehow she flipped over in the air and was on her back by the time she reached the ground. We ran across the street, over to her. She screamed two or three times. I noticed she had dirt in her hair.

"Lanie?" Ricky said. "That was no way to fly. What were you thinking?"

"But she's hurt," I said.

"No, he's *right*!" Lanie said, brushing grass off her butt as she stood. She straightened her sweat bottoms. "I'll practice flying a while by myself when I go back

home. I'll be the best flier in the world. I'll even be better than Superman and Underdog."

Now Ricky made no attempt to hide his laughter. "I don't know, Lanie, Underdog flies pretty good."

"Well, he better eat a lot of doggy biscuits, 'cause I'm wiping up the floor with him."

The three of us sat on the porch until supper was ready. Nobody said anything else.

"How's my little turdbird?"

Uncle Everett was back. Lanie stepped out of Rhiannon's room and gave him a hug and kiss.

"I had fun," Lanie said.

"You *did*?!?" said Ricky.

"I had fun. I did puzzles and I ran races in the backyard."

She hadn't done either of those things, unless she'd done them while we were in school. Rhiannon sat down on the living room floor, looking like she wanted to speak but didn't know exactly what to say.

Bill walked up behind Meredith to greet Uncle Everett. My father slipped an arm around her waist before she could squirm away. She stayed in place, but her eyes darted around the room like she was afraid he'd try to pickpocket her or something. Her hands rested on the swell of her belly.

"Did Uncle Bill and Aunt Meredith and the kids treat you good?" Uncle Everett asked.

Lanie grinned, her uneven teeth somehow more prominent behind the braces than usual. "We had roast. We danced and played with the cat. We flew all over town. It was the best week of my life."

And she walked over and hugged Rhiannon, then me, then Ricky; and she even gave Ricky a kiss on the nose. "You are a great teacher. You are a great cousin."

They left.

"I *hate* her!" said Ricky.

Birthdays

It kicks. Its foot is sharp and makes my stomach hurt. I call out for Meredith like I used to do when I was little but Meredith's out in the lobby talking to a bunch of men. The men are greasy and loud and they keep pinching her butt. I can see them. The door is closed but I can see them. And there's the doctor, a gray man with black eyebrows and a white coat. He hands me a lollipop, tells me to push. I try to tell him it's all a big mistake, my mother's the one having the baby--but I can't talk. The words die on my lips. Ricky climbs in through the window, puts me in a headlock, and leaves. Rhiannon and Bill are gone.

It's still kicking, this writhing ball of life in me. It's demanding to be let out. The doctor laughs at me when I cry.

I always woke up before the baby could arrive. Rhiannon called it a recurring dream. The first time I ever had it was just after school got out for the summer at the end of second grade. Sometimes the doctor was someone I didn't know, just a random body and face; sometimes it was Ricky or old Mrs. Bradley from first grade or Grandpa Ted. Meredith was never in the room during the dream, as if she didn't exist at all. Sometimes Grandpa Ted was there even when he wasn't the doctor. He nibbled a wet cigar and told me it'd be okay.

I was afraid of the dreams. By early July, I was having them four or five times a week.

My eighth birthday, July 6th: big party in the backyard, posters of Luke Skywalker and C3PO and Princess Leia lining the outer walls of the house. Gorgeous eighty-degree weather. Meredith stayed inside because the baby was expected to arrive any day. Schultz had spent the night at our house, then shot hoops with me across the street most of the morning. He made a lot more baskets than I did. He said he was taking my Princess Leia poster home with him after the party. Rhiannon and I both laughed. For a while Ricky ran around the yard popping all my balloons, but he stopped when Bill came outside.

My other friends began showing up around 12:30. Soon there were about five or six of them, right there in my backyard. And who'd told Blubber Butt he could come to my party? He was just walking by the house and saw us all in the yard; he merged with Nim and Stacy Jones as they stepped out of Miss Rainer's car. I decided I'd be nice to him until he started being mean and then I'd clobber him. Rhiannon was watching him pretty closely. She was probably thinking of the time in first grade when he tried to beat me up and she stopped him and got in trouble for talking back to Mrs. Bradley. I'd forgotten about that day.

We played Tag for a while on my eighth birthday. Schultz ran the fastest but Nim was sneakiest about catching people. She crawled through the bushes and hit my foot with the back of her hand; I didn't even see her coming. Doug always fell on the ground when you tagged him. Stacy let the boys catch up to her, then screamed and giggled all in one long, impressive breath. Taylor Ellis quit the first time someone tagged him. Blubber Butt sat at the picnic table, laughing at everyone and eating barbecue potato chips.

When we got bored with our game of Tag, I looked for Bill to ask him where the Twister board was but he was nowhere to be found. Ricky pointed to the upstairs bedroom window, which was opened halfway. Meredith was inside, looking down at us. She looked mad. But she wasn't mad at us; we saw her turn around and yell at Bill standing behind her. We couldn't hear what she said very well but then Bill yelled back

and we could hear *him*. Everybody stopped playing and running and laughing and eating potato chips so they could watch my parents fight without any distractions.

“What’s goin’ on?” Blubber Butt asked.

“Shh! Quiet, Darrell. Duncan’s parents are fighting,” whispered Stacy.

“Man, that’s rough,” Blubber Butt said. “Fightin’ and screamin’ at your own *birthday party*?”

I sat down at the picnic table, between Ricky and Blubber Butt.

Bill’s voice on my eighth birthday, echoing across the yard: “--with the FUCKING SHIT I’m dealing with at work, YOU think YOU got problems just sitting around waiting for our goddamn spawn--”

Taylor said, “That’s a sin. He took the Lord’s name in vain. Your dad’s a sinner.”

Blubber Butt smacked the back of Taylor’s head. “Stop talkin’ to everybody, Jesus boy!”

Stacy laughed.

“It’s not funny,” Nim said.

“--and I don’t even remember conceiving it! What?... I don’t give a shit if those little ASSHOLES *CAN HEAR ME*--”

Everybody looked at me. After all, it *was* my eighth birthday.

I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“You okay, boss?” Schultz asked.

I couldn’t speak.

“*We* ’ll be okay, Schultz,” said Ricky. “We don’t need them to be nice to us, either one of them. It’s all bullshit. They just want their baby, and to hell with us.”

Her baby, I thought.

Silence. Rhiannon set one hand on Ricky’s shoulder, and the other on mine.

My mouth was dry.

Then we heard *Meredith* yelling. But she wasn't yelling mean things. Bill stopped his obscenity-ridden tirade, and they were downstairs and outside in about fifteen seconds. He put Meredith in the back seat of the Dodge and said, "Okay, kids, party's over! Baby's on its way! Everybody get home." Doug said something about not getting to eat the cake. Rhiannon ran inside, grabbed Meredith's luggage, locked the doors with Bill's keys. Ricky and I crowded into the backseat, me in the middle, while Rhiannon took the front passenger seat. Bill shoved the car into reverse, and we were out of the driveway and onto the street. Through the back window of the car I could see my friends slowly leaving the yard in different directions. The posters on the house flapped lightly in the breeze. The bowl of potato chips was overturned. I still couldn't say anything, which was just as well because we were speeding through town so fast that I probably wouldn't have been heard anyway.

Kicking kicking push. Feet hurt stomach. Toes.

The window by the street is open. I can hear the baby crying, voice sounding out through my belly button. It wants out, needs out. It can't breathe in there.

This time Schultz is the doctor. The stethoscope is loose on his ears and the white coat is too big. He says you're gonna be all right boss just calm down it's okay man we'll getcha through this where's that nurse oh there she is hey she's kinda cute shh Duncan calm down now let's get that baby out so he can have my baseball cards and the baby's crying louder now. I'm naked and my belly button's getting bigger. It's the size of a baseball and still growing. Schultz says hey wait I don't think that's s'posed to happen hang on let me get that hot nurse in here and I feel chalkboard fingernails scraping down the wall of my stomach. It'll be out soon and it sounds hungry.

Schultz comes back with the nurse. It's Stacy Jones. She grins and tries to look as cute as possible. She says Duncan don't worry you won't get in trouble for having a baby and she winks at Schultz. He winks back. Stacy hands me a red-and-white lollipop

as Schultz grabs a pair of tongs. More fingernails scraping me from the inside. This has got to be a dream--

"Are you okay?"

My eyes were sleep-crusty. The waiting room swam around, then stopped. There was a bad taste in the back of my throat from sleeping during the day.

"Duncan? You all right?" Rhiannon said. She was sitting with Ricky and Schultz and Nim and Miss Rainer. We were all in stiff chairs. My butt hurt from sitting too long.

"The baby was tearing up my insides," I said.

Ricky swallowed a bite of Twinkie and looked at me.

Miss Rainer rubbed her left eye. "You really scared me for a minute, Duncan," she said, all calm and slow. "You were shaking in your sleep. I thought you were going to fall out of your chair."

"How's, how's Meredith?"

"We haven't heard yet, hon. When I had Naomi I was in labor for ten hours. It could take a while."

"I'm hungry," Ricky said.

"Well, maybe if you'd stop eating Twinkies you'd stop thinking about food," Rhiannon said.

"Bite my ass."

"Hey," whispered Miss Rainer. "We're in a hospital. Try to keep it down. I told your mother I'd sit out here with you and keep you company. She'll be mad at me if you don't behave."

Lots of time passed. Nim read. Schultz talked. I sat.

The hours began to blur. Friends and relatives dropped by, stayed, talked to us, left. Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy brought my birthday present (a Waldenbooks gift certificate for ten dollars) and said they'd be back. Uncle Jim showed up long enough to

ask Bill for fifty bucks. Bill had just stepped out of the delivery room to get some air, and his response to Uncle Jim earned him a glare from Miss Rainer. Grandma Ruth had come with Uncle Jim, but at the last second she decided to wait in the car. Preacher Ellis had us all close our eyes and hold hands and pray with him. Ricky's hand was sweaty, Nim's hand soft. Then we went downstairs for hospital food: rubber hamburger, plastic fries. Rhiannon refused to eat; she looked sad. I whispered this to Schultz, and we snuck off for a few minutes and drew her a picture of clowns at the circus. Nim had told us waiting rooms always have crayons, and she was right. My clown in the picture was blue and had glasses. Schultz's clown was red and had a beer gut. There was also a poodle jumping through hoops and a bearded lady with a U-turn smile. Rhiannon loved the picture, hugged us both. Schultz started drawing her another picture. Miss Rainer sat and read a tattered paperback with a man and a woman kissing on the cover. Ricky made lots of paper airplanes that kept nosediving to the floor whenever he threw them. Then I wanted to write a story for Meredith to cheer her up but all the paper was gone. Around nine o'clock Miss Rainer and Nim went home to get some sleep. Schultz said he'd stay with me until the baby got there no matter how long it took. I couldn't sleep because I'd slept so long that afternoon. We were waiting-room prisoners. The lights were bright in there but Ricky and Rhiannon and Schultz managed to fall asleep anyway. It was all a blur to me running together like watercolors making the room a muss a fuss swimming in pools and the clowns never danced unless you shook the picture around. I blinked and blinked; blinks got longer and the room got darker and there was nothing to do but sleep--

My stomach is full of firecrackers and dynamite. No Meredith, no Bill. I'm all alone but it's not fair because Meredith started the baby and she should have it, not me. It's clawing in me and that's Bill's fault because he yelled at Meredith and made the baby mad and now it's a monster. It's hurting me and about now the doctor will come in.

It's Mr. Skordos, wearing the white doctor's coat. He's eating a turkey sandwich from his restaurant but he puts it down when he sees me. He smells like cinnamon and he winks at me; even though I don't like him very much I feel okay for a moment. He says something in Greek, and I start screaming. Nim's dog Casey is in the bed with me. His teeth are around my leg but he doesn't bite. Bill rushes in and punches Mr. Skordos in the neck. The monster baby rips its way out of my belly, grabs Bill. The monster baby is as big and round as Mr. Skordos. It throws Bill in the corner of the hospital room and rides away on Casey's back. Mr. Skordos smiles; the monster baby saved him. Then I cry and he cries with me.

Rhiannon woke me up in the night. She didn't wake up Schultz. She led me to Meredith in room 204. The baby was in Meredith's arms. Bill's eyes were drooping but a weak smile was on his face. Ricky was already there, staring at the baby that Meredith was holding.

I looked.

It wasn't a monster.

It was tiny.

There was a small mole on the end of its nose.

"Benjamin Jacob Pierce," Meredith said. Her voice cracked.

Benjamin. Benny.

It was after midnight. Early hours of July 7th.

His birthday was the day after mine. Just barely.

She let me hold him. *Careful with the head. Firm grip on the legs.*

Benny slept.

Lancaster, Vadnal, and Gobtop

There were three ghosts in town, their names were Lancaster, Vadnal, and Gobtop. Lancaster was the oldest ghost, he liked to sing blues music like my sister Rhiannon. Vadnal was mean and smoked a pipe. Gobtop was goofy and made up rhymes about people he saw. They had a big party for Halloween, they had it at the chief of police's house. The chief of police's family got scared and left so the ghosts had the house all to themselves.

"Cool!" said Doug. "That's cool. Tomorrow's Halloween too so that's gonna be tomorrow.."

"Don't interrupt," Nim said. "Wait a minute. Duncan, are you going to tell us more about the chief of police's family and how the ghosts scared them away?"

"Um."

"I bet it was Vadnal that scared 'em, since he's the mean one," Schultz said.

"I didn't write about that too much," I said. The four of us were sitting under a tree at the park, which was two blocks from my house. I couldn't go any farther unless either Rhiannon or Ricky was with me, or I had permission from my parents.

"Those are funny names too," Doug said. "Where'd you get those names?"

I scratched my head. "Oh, uh, Gobtop is what Rhiannon called Ricky the other day. Vadnal was when I tried to write 'vandal' but wrote it wrong. And I don't know about Lancaster."

"Cool," Doug said again. That was what he always said about my stories.

Nim was more analytical: "How much power do the ghosts have?"

"A lot," I said. "Almost all the power in the town."

"How did they get it if they're ghosts?"

"I don't know." But that didn't seem like a good answer, so I added: "All that power's invisible so we can't get to it but they're ghosts so they can see it 'cause they're almost invisible."

Nim nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense."

"Okay," said Schultz, "now that that's settled. What happened then?"

The party went on for five or six days. All the ghosts in town and all the vampires and werewolves that only came out at nighttime were there at the party. Lancaster put on dark glasses and sang the blues like my sister Rhiannon. Gobtop stole money off everybody but the werewolves, he was scared of them. Vadnal called them all names and smoked a pipe. Gobtop said "Look at Vadnal he's more than we can handle"

"Hey, he *does* make up rhymes!" Doug said.

"I think Vadnal should steal the money instead of Gobtop. Vadnal is meaner so that seems like something he'd do."

"Nim! Don't ruin the story," said Schultz.

"No, it's okay," I said. "That's a good idea. Too bad I already wrote the story or else I could change it."

"I want to know more about the vampires, boss," Schultz said. "Are they in the story some more?"

"Not really. But I can write a vampire story for you if you want."

Doug picked up a small stick and started pushing it around in the mud.

Then the party got done and the monsters and stuff went home. But Vadnal said he wanted to scare all the teachers, "I want to scare all the teachers" he said. So the three ghosts went to school and they saw Nim there.

"No!" said Nim. "Don't put me in your story."

"Too late," I said, "you're in there now. See your name?"

"Hey, there's your mom and Rhiannon," said Schultz.

I looked up. Meredith was pushing the stroller; I could just barely see the top of Benny's head as they made their way up the road toward us. Rhiannon walked alongside them, telling my mother about some boy in her class named Phillip.

"I don't want to go home," I said.

"You can come over to my house," Doug offered.

"She won't let me. Grandma Ruth's coming over tonight. We all have to be there."

"Duncan, it's starting to get dark," Meredith said.

A light, cool breeze rustled the tree branches. Rhiannon tightened Benny's blanket a little so he wouldn't catch cold. They kept going.

Gobtop said "Nim it's Nim she's not a him she plays in the gym her hat has a brim" and Vadnal bit her hand. But Lancaster hit him and made him say sorry, Lancaster and Nim sang a blues song for me and Schultz and Doug and Stacy. The ghosts left school and flew around, scared people driving around. The end.

"Yeah! Great ending!" said Doug.

"I guess that was okay," Nim said, but a little smile crept across her face.

Schultz said, "I think Vadnal should bite both of Nim's hands."

"Schultz!" Nim yelled. "Wait a minute, Duncan. How can a ghost bite my hand?"

I stared at the swingset a few yards in front of us, trying to think of an answer.

"Ghosts have real sharp teeth," Doug said.

"Thanks, Doug," I said.

We watched the sun go down.

Stormy Monday Blues

"Get in," Bill said.

I shook my head. "I'm going to Schultz's house."

"Duncan, set your whiny ass down in the backseat."

Ricky grinned, even sneered at me from the driver's seat. He was only thirteen; he wasn't supposed to be driving yet.

"Do I get to drive next?"

"No," said Bill. Schultz caught up with me, setting his spelling book down on the curb we were standing on. In the crowd of departing kids behind him I could see Stephanie Carmichael, the girl I considered to be the prettiest third-grade girl in the universe. As usual, she didn't look in my direction. This time it was fine by me, because I didn't want her to know the people in the ancient Dodge were my father and brother.

"Why does Ricky get to drive? How come I don't get to?" I asked.

"Because," Bill said, rubbing his new moustache with his left thumb, "you are a pansy-boy fairy and Ricky is not. That should be enough reason for anyone. Now get in the car."

The insult didn't faze me; I'd heard plenty more just like it from my father, especially in the five months since Benny was born. Schultz flinched, because out of his family only his older brother Sam ever called him names. But I was distracted by the idea of driving.

I wanted to drive. By my best guess I figured I'd have to be about fifty before my father would let me. Both of my parents said my eyes were bad and I'd have to get

glasses soon. I didn't want glasses; I thought they'd make me look like a geek. It wasn't fair. Meredith said I liked to sit too close to the TV. That reasoning didn't hold up for me because Ricky usually sat even closer than I did, and nobody threatened to take him to an eye doctor. I had a fear of going blind, of having my vision impaired. I'd have to wear dark sunglasses and walk around with a white stick and sway back and forth like Ray Charles. A lot of blues singers were blind though; if I was blind I'd definitely become a blues singer. I'd be Blind Duncan playing Blind Man's Bluff, and I'd have to run my fingers over those weird little bumps to read. That was weird to me, getting all the letters and words from those little bumps. And how could I write? If Ricky had been blind I wouldn't have had to take a ride with him and Bill--

"Can we give Schultz a ride home?" I asked. "It's cold outside. I think it's gonna snow again."

Bill sneezed.

Schultz followed me into the backseat.

The heater was on full-blast in the Dodge. Ricky chewed on his fingernails. I assumed he was either nervous, hungry, or both. I felt sick. Ricky couldn't drive; this entire idea was stupid, he was only thirteen, it was against the law. He pulled away from the curb, away from the playground, away from stillness and security.

I wondered how much trouble I'd be in if I barfed all over the backseat.

Schultz played it cool--he had the knack--but I was scared as hell. Ricky made a joke about an old guy on the sidewalk who was walking a beagle. Bill laughed the same way Grandpa Ted and I laughed at Marx Brothers movies. I didn't understand why Bill and Ricky were buddies all of a sudden. My father even had Ricky listening to country music. In the backseat Schultz pointed at the radio, looked at me, crossed his eyes; he hated country.

Ricky swerved. I looked out the back window just in time to see a confused squirrel running away behind us. Did Ricky swerve to *avoid* it, or to *hit* it? I wanted to get out and walk.

My mind wandered. I thought about Stephanie Carmichael, with her beautiful dark-brown ponytailed hair and her fuzzy light-blue sweaters. A few days earlier I'd heard her tell her friends Susie and Katie that she was taking guitar lessons twice a week. I wondered if she was any good. Then it hit me that Bill must have taken the afternoon off to teach Ricky how to drive, or else he'd still have been at the office. Bill rarely took time off; Meredith called him a workaholic. Just the night before she'd told him off for not paying any attention to Benny. I thought about Benny. I liked being a big brother. Maybe someday Bill could take the afternoon off and teach me how to drive, and we'd pick up Benny and his friends from school. I'd be extremely careful if I was driving a car, especially if my little brother was in it--

We pulled into Schultz's driveway. His dad was outside working on his truck. He waved. Schultz got out. Ricky backed the Dodge to the street, missing Mr. Schultz's garbage cans by about six inches.

I thought we were going back home, but Bill and Ricky had other plans. My father grinned at me when I asked where we were going. He coughed a little, didn't answer me. I didn't want to go anywhere but home. My mind wandered again. I thought about going home so I could play with Benny and eat supper and talk to Nim on the phone. Nim liked to hear about the stories I was writing. Everybody called her my girlfriend, even Schultz sometimes. I wanted Stephanie Carmichael to be my girlfriend. She could come over every day and we'd just sit on my front porch and she'd play guitar and I'd write stories about her. I wondered what would happen if I opened the car door and jumped out while Ricky was driving.

Then I realized we were heading for Nikolai's Cafe. I wasn't too happy, but there was nothing I could do. Our family didn't go to Mr. Skordos's restaurant nearly as much anymore as we used to. Meredith usually went to great lengths to convince us that we should eat at home, at McDonald's, at Pizza Hut--anywhere but Nikolai's. This was fine by me; I'd been extremely uncomfortable around Mr. Skordos ever since I'd seen him having sex with Meredith. Come to think of it, I'd been pretty much uncomfortable around Meredith since then as well.

Mr. Skordos looked happy to see us. There was only one other person eating in his restaurant, a shaky old man at the counter slurping up soup. We sat at a table near the cash register; I hid behind my menu for as long as I possibly could.

My imagination ran away: I saw Bill knocking over his chair, pulling out a gun, forcing Mr. Skordos to open the register. Skordos opened it; Bill got angry because the total amount was only seventy dollars. He shot Mr. Skordos in the forehead; blood caked his face. Ricky drove the getaway car but they left me behind. Officer McCluskey drove up in his cop car, cherry-blueberry lights flashing, and he jumped out of the car screaming and then slapped the cuffs on me. Then I saw myself in jail, serving twenty years for murder in my father's place. I ended up in a cell with Blubber Butt, who beat me up and made fun of me because I was going blind--

The skinny waitress with the scary-looking perm smiled madly as she brought out our food, which I didn't even remember ordering. Bill looked at me funny. Ricky ate. A woman in a purple hat walked in and asked the waitress where the restroom was.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Bill asked me.

"Huh?"

"You're on your own weirdass wavelength. Also, you're as white as a sheet on a Klan member."

"I'm just, um, thinking," I said. "About a story I want to write."

"Is it another Cosmo story?" For some reason, out of the ten or fifteen stories of mine that Bill had read, the only one he'd liked was one about an astronaut named Cosmo who starts a civilization on Jupiter but abandons it when its people begin searching for a new king. He requested I write sequels to "Cosmo" on a regular basis, but every time I tried I hated the results because they felt too forced.

"No," I said. "It's about a robbery. A kid goes to jail."

"That story's been done," Ricky said.

"Is the kid an astronaut?" Bill asked.

"No," I said again.

Stacy Jones and her parents walked past us at that point; Stacy waved at me and I waved back. They sat down at the next table.

"Who's that?" Bill said.

"You know. It's Stacy Jones."

"She was at Duncan's birthday party," said Ricky.

Bill smiled; he raised his voice and said, "Duncan, wetting the bed is nothing to be ashamed of, my dear cowardly young son. It doesn't mean you're a fairy or a little pussy."

Mrs. Jones stopped speaking to her husband in mid-sentence. She turned her head and glared at Bill over her glasses.

"What?" Bill said to her. "You think it does?"

Mr. Jones stared at his menu, pretending nothing was going on. After a few seconds Mrs. Jones resumed her conversation with him, but in hushed tones.

My father had already lost interest in embarrassing me; he stood and walked over to Mr. Skordos, who was punching numbers into a calculator behind the counter.

Stacy, on her way to the ladies' room, stopped to talk. "Why did your dad say that?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's not that big a deal, though."

She changed the subject. "I played a game of checkers with my dad, and I won! I'm to where I can almost beat him at chess too."

"You know how to play chess?" I said.

Ricky ate.

"Know what else?" said Stacy. "I found a puppy and we might get to keep him. He's got big, sad eyes and he's soooooo cute! I just love him."

Bill spoke to Mr. Skordos. Mr. Skordos nodded several times, then pulled a folded-over bank envelope from his apron pocket and handed it to my father.

"His name's either Marmaduke, but Mom says that's too much like the Marmaduke cartoon, or maybe Fuzzy 'cause that's what he is." She giggled.

In the midst of this I could hear Bill say, "Only a hundred and forty? That's kind of cheap, don't you think?" He said something else but Stacy's giggle drowned him out.

Ricky kept eating. He was now working on the remaining French fries on my plate.

I thought: *Why is my dad getting money from Mr. Skordos?*

"Well, I hope your dad stops calling you names," Stacy said with a self-conscious shrug, and she moved on toward the ladies' room.

Mr. Skordos's face was noticeably red. "You just don't tell my fiancée, okay?" He walked back to the kitchen; Bill walked back to our table.

"Mr. Skordos says our meals are on the house tonight," Bill said. "But hurry up and finish so we can get to the bank before it closes."

We could hear Mr. Skordos yelling from the kitchen at one of his employees to come out and clear off our table. I glanced down at my plate and saw that it was now empty.

"I guess I'm done," I said.

Ricky burped.

The last of the daylight was almost gone. My stomach was nowhere near full, but I could hold out for a couple of hours at least. This time Bill drove, and I thanked the Lord even though my father's driving wasn't much better than my brother's.

The silence in the car was almost creepy; I felt a strong urge to fill it.

"Did Mr. Skordos give you enough money?" It just slipped out of my mouth.

Bill whirled around, hitting me lightly on the side of the face with his knuckles. The car swerved just a little. "You will mind your goddamn business!" he said.

"Ow, shit!" I said.

Meredith would have spanked me if I'd cussed around her, but from Bill I actually seemed to receive some respect. "Yeah, that's right," he said, "and you're finally starting to sound like a man."

I liked cussing but I tried to avoid it whenever I could, at least at that age. Schultz cussed once in a while. I'd heard Nim say "pissed off" before. Ricky and Rhiannon both cussed all the time when Meredith wasn't around. Stephanie Carmichael, I decided, probably never cussed; her voice was just too sweet, too beautiful, to ever say those words.

Bill said a few of those words himself moments later, when he discovered that the shortcut to the bank was closed for repairs and we'd have to take the long way.

We took the long way.

After Bill got out of the car, I asked Ricky if he knew why Mr. Skordos gave money to our father. Ricky just turned up his country music; Kenny Rogers told us we had to know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. Evidently nobody was going to tell me what was going on.

We were parked about forty feet from the double doors leading into the bank. The doors were glass, and I could see Bill step up to the counter, nodding to the teller and (in my mind, at least) informing her of my bedwetting problem, which had increased after his

wife's act of adultery. The teller was an attractive lady in a yellow dress; she was pretty, but not as pretty as Stephanie Carmichael or her friends Susie and Katie.

Ricky yawned, drumming lightly on the dashboard, almost but not entirely out of tune to the music.

I looked in through the double doors.

My mind made pictures.

A security guard beckoned me inside. All the tellers clapped when I walked in. The lady in the yellow dress clapped the loudest and hardest. A tall, heavyset man with a red beard said I'd won the Christmas jackpot, the big prize; they ran the contest only once every ten years and I was the winner! Redbeard handed me a large cardboard check made out to Duncan Pierce for five hundred thousand dollars. I jumped up and down. I was rich. Now I could pay for my own eye exams and maybe even a special operation so I wouldn't go blind and have to wear glasses and look like a geek. Ricky stood to the side, looking like he was going to vomit. I'd buy us all a great big mansion and Rhiannon could have her own music hall, and it would always be summertime and Stephanie Carmichael would fall in love with me, and we could sit by the swimming pool writing and playing songs on the guitar, and Stephanie's friend Susie would fall in love with Schultz and her friend Katie would fall in love with Doug, and there'd be no more fathers who called their sons names or mothers who made love to other men, "Duncan, quit fucking around!" Ricky yelled.

I was no longer in the car.

I was standing by the drive-up window, smiling.

It started to snow.

The attractive lady in the yellow dress frowned, waving me aside so a brown van could pull up where I'd been standing. I shivered, wondering when the world had gotten so cold.

Bill stepped out of the bank, carrying his copy of the deposit slip in front of him so he could read it again and again. He grabbed my arm. I saw the deposit slip long enough to know he had over six hundred dollars saved up. Presumably all that money had come from Mr. Skordos.

I liked collecting big-sounding words. Monday's word was *unpredictable*, which my father had been when he visited Mr. Skordos instead of taking us home after school. *Unpredictable*. And I needed a word for Tuesday, something that would sound just as big and impressive. Maybe Rhiannon's thesaurus would have some good words in it that I could steal.

We pulled onto our street, then into our driveway. Bill pressed the garage-door opener. I clutched my books and thought of how great it would be to write a book myself, using some of those big words and also some smaller ones to create a story that was completely mine, a story people would want to read.

We climbed out of the Dodge. We walked under falling wild snowflakes. Porch light on, shining. Kitchen table: two dirty plates, three clean. I needed a word for Tuesday.

I walked past Meredith, who was yelling at Bill because she'd cooked spaghetti for us and we'd missed it. Behind me Ricky told her he didn't mind having another meal even though he'd already ate. Meredith said some cuss words. I stopped just as I reached the living room, waiting a few moments to see if Bill would mention Mr. Skordos to her, but he didn't so I headed for my sister's room to get her thesaurus. I'd find a big word if it took all night, and not a cuss word either.

Rhiannon sat on her bedroom floor listening to "Stormy Monday Blues" on her radio. Bentleyville had a terrific blues station. "What's going on?" she asked me.

"We ate at Mr. Skordos's restaurant," I said. "Mr. Skordos. You know, Mr. Skordos."

She laughed. "Yeah, I know Mr. Skordos. What about him?"

I shook my head. I was too tired to go into it.

The yelling continued from the kitchen.

"They're just dumb," I said. "This is a good song."

Rhiannon smiled. "That guitar is just amazing. I wish they'd stop yelling.

Benny's trying to sleep."

I picked up her thesaurus, leafed through the pages. A movie started up in my head. I was a cowboy in an Old West town, and I had to save Stephanie Carmichael from a band of mean, ugly, stupid, smelly outlaws that kept yelling at her. They were *notorious*; that was Tuesday's word. Benny was in the movie too: he was a few years older, and all the people in Bentleyville Gulch called him Benny the Kid. Rhiannon sang in the saloon. One of the outlaws tried to touch her private parts; she slapped him and threw him out. The townspeople called her Miss Rhiannon Harmony. They called me Blind Duncan, but that was only because I wore an eyepatch.

Psycho Joe's Clubhouse

There wasn't much loose gravel on the road, and that was good. I was still shaky riding my bike but I practiced a lot; soon I'd be as fast as Rhiannon or even Schultz. They'd both taught me how to ride a bike and not fall off. Rhiannon said you just had to keep your balance.

A dog ran alongside me for a while. This dog was pretty brave, not even looking both ways for cars or anything. Brave or foolish; I didn't know. I stopped pedaling, and the dog stopped running. It was a girl dog, a whippet mixed with some unidentifiable breed. She had a collar, and the tag attached indicated that her name was Skittish and she belonged to someone named Lizzy. I didn't think it was fair that this Lizzy person could have a dog and I couldn't. Bill and Meredith had said we couldn't have another pet after Rhiannon's cat Snuffles died. I sat on my bike seat, watching this dog; she grinned back at me, panting from the run. Finally she turned and walked away, having lost interest in our staring contest. I started riding again.

The sun had just started going down. My bike was creating a breeze. Leaves were growing back on tree branches. I wore my light jacket but probably didn't need it. Winter had ended. It was the first Saturday of April, a good time to get our club going.

I wobbled on my bike. *Better take it slow*, I thought.

Four chairs stood in Doug's grandpa's old toolshed, all in lousy condition but so was the toolshed so it didn't make much difference. We had a card table and a radio and some paper to write on if we needed it. We wanted to put up posters as soon as we got

the money to buy them. The wood floor was dirty but I didn't see a broom so I figured we didn't have to worry about it. We'd all written our names on the wall, behind where the door hit so that Doug's grandparents wouldn't see them when they came out there. Our names stood out in proud black Magic Marker. Schultz wrote the biggest. My name was the only one in cursive (Doug called it "curfiss").

"Hey boss," said Schultz as I walked in.

"Hi guys."

"We were gonna start without ya," Doug said between shallow breaths. He munched on a Snickers bar.

"Supper was late," I said. "Bill got a raise. We were celebrating."

"Cool," said Schultz.

"You forgot, Pierce," said Psycho Joe. He pointed to the RC can with the big hole cut into the top.

"Sorry, Joe." I plunked a quarter in.

"Gotta pay your dues, hoser."

"We'll all make a dollar every time we have a meeting," said Schultz. "Then we can buy stuff."

"Yeah," Joe said, "like pictures of strip-naked women."

Doug frowned. "I can't put stuff like that up. Grandpa won't let me, I don't think."

Joe's grin disappeared. "Don't cross me, Fry. Don't forget I'm the leader of this club." He picked at a small scab on the back of his left arm and leaned back in his chair.

Schultz smirked. "We're all the leaders, dumbass," he said.

"Oh. Yeah. Whatever. You guys wanna see sump'n cool?"

"Yeah," said Doug.

I'd heard about Psycho Joe. This could be *anything*.

Joe pulled a folded-up snapshot out of his billfold. He passed it around. Doug stared at it, Schultz nodded with that same smirk, and now it was to me.

The girl in the picture had shoulder-length blond hair and she was wearing a towel around her waist, and nothing else. She reminded me of the magazine pictures Schultz's brother Sam used to show us, except this girl was only about twelve or thirteen. She had smaller boobs than the girls in the magazines.

"Who's that?" I asked, handing the picture back. It felt weird just looking at it. The girl in Joe's picture was looking away, probably trying to find her shirt. I didn't think she knew anyone else was in the room taking her picture.

"Don't ask dumb questions," Joe said.

"She's pretty," said Doug.

Schultz agreed: "She's pretty hot."

"Yeah? You guys like that picture, do ya?"

"Can we start the meeting now?" I said.

Psycho Joe looked up from his picture. His eyes locked on mine, and I could see why people called him Psycho Joe. The world shifted and I wished I wasn't there.

But Joe just chuckled to himself. He looked at Schultz, then at Doug. "Don't forget who's in charge here, Pierce. Didja forget? Don't forget."

Schultz scowled. "Dude, chill out. Duncan's okay. He's cool."

Then the door opened from the outside. It was Doug's grandpa, his bald head dotted with sweat from working in the garden. "Hallo chickens," he said. He always called us kids chickens. But he didn't mean that we were cowardly.

"Hi, Gramps," said Doug.

Gramps Fry wheezed when he talked. It was from all the cigarettes he'd smoked in his long life. I remembered the past Christmas, when Meredith caught Rhiannon smoking in the garage and yelled at her for about an hour straight. Bill said he'd throw Rhiannon out of the house if he ever caught her smoking around Benny or me, especially

Benny because he was still a baby and his lungs couldn't handle it. Punishing my sister for smoking was just about the only thing my parents had agreed on in just about as long as I could remember.

Bill and Meredith didn't have to worry about me smoking; that stuff smelled gross. So did Gramps a little, but I pretended he didn't.

"Hallo, Dougie. Hallo, Duncan. Hallo, Matt. Don't remember your other friend here."

Doug smiled a little. "This is Joe."

Joe raised a hand to shake. I'd never thought of doing that. "Howya doin', Mr. Fry."

Gramps shook Psycho Joe's hand. "Them damn kids, they call me Gramps. I don't know where they got *that* from," and here he winked at me, "but I s'pose since you're runnin' with 'em you should call me Gramps too. Good to know ya, Joe."

The old man walked with an uneasy determination. He put a calloused hand on Doug's shoulder. "Your Gramma's makin' sugar cookies like you like, so her little chickens can eat their feed." He wheezed. "Well Dougie, where's that other kid you got with ya sometimes? That Tyler?"

"Taylor," Doug said.

We all looked at Joe. He hated Taylor Ellis.

"He's doing something at the church," I said.

"Well, we're, ya know what we're gonna do? We're gonna get another chair for him next time he's here." Gramps coughed a few times.

Joe's eyes narrowed. He squinted at us. It wasn't our fault Taylor wouldn't let him copy his spelling homework. It wasn't Taylor's fault either; he was the Preacher's son, so he wasn't allowed to do anything bad.

"Well, I'll leave ya to it," Gramps said, "whatever it is." He wandered out of the toolshed, favoring his left leg as he walked.

The meeting was just getting started when he hobbled back in and said that Doug had a phone call. They both headed to the house.

"Lemme tell you guys sump'n," Joe said. "There ain't gonna be no Taylor Ellis in this club. We don't want no whiny little Cry Stains. He'd go tell his dad everything we do."

"I go," I said, and then wished I hadn't opened my mouth.

Joe said, "You. You go where?"

"Uh. Church."

Joe waved his hands in front of his face. He looked like he was swatting away flies. "Pierce, listen. You only go 'cause your mom makes you. You don't talk about God and shit in school, so that's okay. Ellis can't shut his ass about God. He's not a Christian, he's a Cry Stain. He's always tellin' me how much I sin and I'm gonna burn in Hell and they won't give me no cold water there. Screw that."

"But..."

"You ever feel Nim Rainer up?"

Schultz laughed. "Dude, where the hell did *that* come from? We were talking about Taylor."

"Well, now we're talkin' about Nim. How far'd you get?"

Doug was back. "It was my mom."

"Shut up, Doug." Joe picked at his scab. "Have you ever felt Nim Rainer's tits?" he asked me. "Not that she has anything to feel. Not like that girl in the picture, huh?"

"I'm not even nine years old yet!" I said. My voice sounded squeaky like Rocky the flying squirrel.

Psycho Joe shook his head. He looked like a gangster trying to find somebody to shoot. "Shit, Pierce, do you *ever* do dangerous shit?"

"I saw him step on a snake when we were fishin' with Gramps once," Doug said.

Joe burst out laughing, but it wasn't a friendly laugh. "Shit! *Shit!* Do *any* of you hosers do dangerous shit?"

Before any of us could answer he was up and out the door. Schultz got up to see where he went. Then he turned to us.

"I think he wants us to follow him," he said.

"I don't want to."

"I know, Duncan. I know. Look, you don't have to answer his asshole questions. He's just saying all that to make you feel stupid. Come on. Man, come on."

I stood up. We left the toolshed clubhouse: first Schultz, then me, then Doug; we all followed Psycho Joe.

Sunlight glimmered faint above town, all but gone in favor of the dark. All four of us were on our bikes pedaling away from Bentleyville, away from the sun, heading to the east. I wondered if that dog would cross paths with us, but I doubted it because I'd seen her about a mile back from where we were. And she didn't.

Psycho Joe was in front, reckless-riding on his Schwinn. Next was Schultz on his old dirt bike. I let Doug ahead of me so I could be the caboose. Doug panted and wheezed as he pedaled. Maybe I could slip away and nobody would notice. I'd be back home before it got completely dark; Rhiannon and I could listen to the blues station. Schultz and Doug would understand, and why did I give six craps what Psycho Joe thought? I wasn't the one going around town knocking over garbage cans and spray-painting obscene messages on other people's doghouses. It wasn't me that...

"Pierce, you're lagging behind! Get your dick out of your hand!" Joe yelled.

Doug looked back at me. He was a little winded; I could almost smell the sweat splashing off him.

A few minutes later, and the crickets had begun to call. Psycho Joe belted out the theme from "Fraggle Rock" in a loud, creaky voice. He was so far ahead of us by this

time that I could barely see him as his feet pumped those pedals up and down country-road hills, but I knew he wouldn't allow himself to get out of sight entirely. Schultz knew it too, and slacked off a little on the pedals until he was just ahead of me, now riding directly alongside Doug. Schultz slapped at my right arm. I glanced over. The last traces of sunlight pranced across Schultz's sarcastic grin.

Psycho Joe sailed into a cornfield just past the bridge. Jumped off his bike. Landed in a heap, laughing to the ever-darkening sky. The bike tumbled to the ground about two yards ahead of him.

We caught up. "Now what?" said Schultz.

Joe stood, still laughing. "Man, that was a grody fall," he snickered. "That was pisser time. You guys ready for some fun?"

"What're we doin' here?" Doug asked. "When're we gonna do the meeting?"

Suddenly Psycho Joe stopped laughing. He swept his night-black hair out of his eyes and yelled, "THIS IS THE MEETING, FAGGOT! FOLLOW ME, YOU BIG PUSSIES!"

"What is your problem?" Schultz said.

Psycho Joe smiled, the gap between his front teeth visible. "Schultz, I don't *have* a problem. Sometimes ya just gotta go off. Sorry it threw you off, man."

"Oh," said Schultz. "You gonna 'pologize to Doug for callin' him a faggot?"

Doug ran a hand over his forehead, absently checking for perspiration. "Nah, it's okay, guys. Didn't bother me none."

"That's a good man, Fry," Joe said.

"Yeah. It's okay, Psycho Joe."

All of us stared at Doug. He didn't realize what he'd said at first. Psycho Joe caught it though.

"Congratulations," he said. "You're first, bitchstain."

Doug opened his mouth but his throat held back all his words.

"You *forgot*, Fry," Joe said. "You *forgot* who's in charge. This'll help you remember, buddy." He put an arm around Doug's shoulders, almost congenially. The scab on his left arm was inches from Doug's face. "Do you see that house over there 'cross the road? The big white farmhouse with the barn in back?"

Doug nodded.

"You're gonna go up to the back porch and take sump'n. I don't even care what. Just grab sump'n and bring it back and that'll be your trophy. If you do that and don't get caught you can stay in the club. If you don't do it you're a pussy."

"But the club's at my house."

Joe spat on the ground. "Uh-uh, Fry. The club is *not* at your house, it's at your grandparents' house. The rest of us, we can find some other old prunes to dish out milk and cookies. Now quit bein' a hoser and get over there and do what I said."

Doug muttered something. I wasn't sure what he said but it sounded like "...don't talk bad 'bout Gramps and Gramma..." He bent over to tie his shoe, which didn't need to be tied.

Schultz said, "Man, you gotta stop messin' with Doug. He ain't a fightin' guy."

"Yeah, maybe we should just go home and not worry about this," I said.

Doug stood up. "Ever'body shut up. I'm goin'." He pushed past me. Across the road he went, stepping furiously in some weird march-shuffle. He tripped on his large feet once, coughed twice, and then he was in the front yard. The rest of us walked sideways as he walked forward, keeping his pace but staying across the road from the house.

"He's not even trying to hide," I said.

Schultz and Joe just stared.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There was Doug, shuffling in his march, march and shuffle, easy as walking home from school. He wandered around a little, searching for something that would show Psycho Joe he wasn't a pussy. He stepped to

the edge of the back porch, just past where we could see him, merging with the shadows. Now something was in his hand. He even stood there for a minute, motionless, almost like he was daring Joe to yell and rat him out, and finally came back. Once his foot came into contact with the driveway rocks and the noise echoed in the night. I held my breath. The only light was from the second floor of the house, a lamp in the window or something, but I was still afraid, scared for Doug. Now his march was a little slower, his shuffle a little more even. Now he was crossing the road, and now he was back, wheezing-panting like the dog I'd seen on the way out of Bentleyville when it was still light outside and none of this had happened yet.

"That was pretty good," Joe said.

"Pretty good? That was amazing!" Schultz clapped Doug on the back.

Doug did not speak.

He was holding a rake.

"Good luck carryin' your trophy back on your bike, Fry," said Psycho Joe. "But I'm impressed. You're in."

Doug nodded, but he didn't look all that thrilled about his success.

"Who's next? Let's see..." Joe glanced at Schultz. *No problem, I thought, things are okay, Schultz'll refuse and then I won't have to do it...*

"All right," said Schultz. "But if I go and then you weasel out on us, Joe, I'll beat your happy ass."

"Get goin'," said Joe.

Schultz stopped long enough to look back at me--we both shrugged--and then he started the long walk across the road and into the yard. He didn't march and he didn't shuffle; I guess you could best describe it as a mosey, like the bristly cowboys in Bill's Westerns. He walked with his usual steady confidence, and all of a sudden I wondered what my walk would be like. He walked back farther behind the house than Doug had. When he came back he was carrying a basketball; the old-fashioned Western shoot-em-up

cowboy carried a basketball instead of a six-shooter. And a breeze began to blow, just enough that I could almost picture the tumbleweeds drifting by. Schultz moseyed back to us, his foot touching sidewalk then grass then road, and he looked ready to throw that ball right at Psycho Joe's face.

I said the first thing that came to mind: "That's a nice basketball, Schultz."

He smiled. "Yeah, all aired up too."

"Okay, Pierce, your turn," said Psycho Joe. "Better make it fast, 'cause I'm gettin' hungry..."

"Why don't *you* go next?!?" Schultz said to Joe. He tried to spin the basketball on one index finger. It spun for about a second, then fell to the grass. "You'll love it. It's a *thrill*."

Joe didn't answer right away. I think he wanted to go last. Or not at all.

Doug still wasn't speaking. His arms were crossed, his breathing back to normal (which was still a wheezing for Doug).

Joe glared at me. He hesitated, as if I was going to offer to go before him. I didn't move. Joe cracked his knuckles--he was the first kid in our class who could--and started to walk.

He'd barely made it to the side of the house, right smack in the middle of the yard next to a clothesline, when the porch light came on.

"Oh shit!" Doug said. I wasn't used to hearing him cuss.

"We'd better hide," said Schultz, pointing us toward the ditch, where it was darkest. "This ain't gonna be good."

"It will if they don't see *us*," I said.

Psycho Joe pulled a pair of jeans off the clothesline and started running back.

"Hold it, you little bastard!"

The voice, sharp and loud, came from the front porch. A flashlight beam appeared, and Joe was right in the middle of it. The man holding the flashlight ran down

the front steps and over the sidewalk as if he was ten years old, but in reality he had to be at least my father's age, if not older.

Joe stopped running. He knew when he was caught.

"Red-handed," said the flashlight man. He shined the light in Joe's face, ambling up to him. "Joe Carswell." He laughed. "Don't look so shocked, boy. I know you. Your sister Marcy's on the girls' basketball team with my girl Natalie. You're holding Natalie's pants."

Joe threw them back up on the clothesline; Natalie's father straightened them out. Doug and Schultz and I crouched down further into the ditch, safely out of sight of the flashlight man.

Psycho Joe said something we couldn't hear. The man with the flashlight looked in our direction, *past* us. We were still safe.

"I don't see nobody, Joe. Do you really see anybody? Is that a sham, or are you really crazy like they say?"

No answer from Psycho Joe.

"Now I don't know what your goal was here tonight, kid, if you were just here to steal some of Natalie's clothes or try to get a peek at her or what, but she's not here. She's in town babysitting. But I'll tell you something, Crazy Joe or Weird Joe or whatever they call you. You'd better never come near here again. If you do you'll leave without the thing that made you wanna come out here in the first place. Catch me?"

No answer from Psycho Joe. He just stared at the flashlight man.

"I see we're not gonna have any more problems. I can see it on your face. You just want to leave. Fine, good, I want you to leave too. Get in the house and sit down and I'll call your folks to come get you. I won't bother asking you what the number is. I'll look it up myself."

"Good thing you didn't go next," Doug said to me.

"Hey, I'd be out there *helpin'* Duncan," Schultz said. He handed me the basketball.

We watched from our hiding place as the flashlight man turned off his flashlight and led Joe inside. We stayed there a long time; we could have escaped and gone home but somehow we just couldn't keep ourselves from sticking around to see how it all turned out.

Fifteen minutes later a station wagon pulled up in the driveway. An inordinately heavy woman, a tall man of medium build, and a teenage girl got out of the car.

Psycho Joe's mom did the talking. His dad said "That's right" and "Dumb kid" and "Grounded for a year and a half" every so often just to show he agreed with her. Psycho Joe's sister, a skinny blonde about Rhiannon's age, stood behind their father.

Schultz gasped. "That's her! That's the girl in the picture."

"What picture?" I asked.

"The picture! Psycho Joe's picture."

"Oh yeah."

"Marcy Carswell? I've heard her name before but I didn't know who she was," Schultz whispered. He shook his head, watching Joe squirm in the front yard as Mrs. Carswell yelled at him. "That kid's a sick son of a bitch. Joe must've snuck in when she was changing clothes, snapped the picture without her seeing him somehow, and showed it to us just to look cool in front of us. Sick son of a bitch. His sister's pretty cute though."

Once or twice Psycho Joe glanced our way across the road, and he tried to speak again but nobody was letting him talk. His father called him a dumb kid and his sister laughed at him, and his mother lectured in a high, articulate voice: "Maybe we should post the rules on the fridge for you, so you don't forget how to act. Did you *forget*? Are you absentminded, you forget you're not supposed to go out and take things like some common kleptomaniac on the street lying in the gutter? I didn't think we had to make it

clear but I guess we do. Rule number one, do not steal, rule number two, do not run around acting like some sex pervert! You tried to steal a girl's clothes!"

"Yeah, pervert," said Marcy.

"We're getting out of here. We're going home. And you're never leaving home again." Mrs. Carswell headed back to the station wagon, squirmed her way into the front passenger seat. The rest of the Carswells followed suit; Mr. Carswell rolled down the driver's window and said, "He's just a stupid kid. See ya, Mort."

They headed back to town.

After Natalie's father went back inside and turned off his porch light, the rest of us stood up, brushed the grass off ourselves, and walked back to our bikes. We left Psycho Joe's bike between the cornfield and the road, lying on its side; that was *his* trophy. Doug tossed the rake aside, but Schultz took the basketball back from me, clutched it in one hand, tight to his chest, and steered his bike with the other hand. I squinted to see the time on my watch: it was 9:14 PM. The crickets sang medleys to us as we rode back. It was a long way into Bentleyville. Being out in the dark with nothing but our bicycles and a basketball was creepy, but we made it home.

Cardboard Boxes and Suitcase

"I'm leaving," said my father.

This, to the tune of oldies on Rhiannon's radio: we heard Donovan singing "Sunshine Superman" to us over guitar chords that sliced the air. When I was little, Bill had occasionally told us kids elaborate stories about the places he'd gone just after college, exotic locations like France and Brazil and the jungles of Africa. Nothing in the stories was true--he'd never even been outside the continental United States--but they were highly entertaining and inventive, and in retrospect they probably helped me learn how to construct a solid story. Now, as then, Rhiannon and Ricky and I sat on the sofa as Bill sat on the coffee table, building a new future for the entire Pierce family in one fell swoop. This time, though, he seemed to actually be going somewhere.

"And where do you think you're going to go?" Rhiannon asked.

"Not far," Bill said, putting out his cigar in the dull green ashtray next to him. A couple of ashes escaped, landing on the surface of the table; Bill absently brushed them to the floor. "Glendale. I signed a lease for an apartment."

"Are we going?" Ricky asked. "Do you have to quit your job?"

"I have a new job at an insurance office in Glendale. Increase in pay by five thousand bucks a year."

"Cool," said Ricky. "Are we going?"

Bill kept his back turned from the kitchen, so he didn't have to face my mother. Meredith sat at the kitchen table with Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy, the three of them looking upset about something. Grandpa Ted started to get up--even from the next room

I could see that his fists were quivering in anger--but Meredith muttered something to him and he sat back down.

"Well, Ricky," Bill said, "whether or not you go with me depends on you. It is your decision. Each of you must decide."

Rhiannon glared at him. "You mean we choose if we go with you or stay here."

"That is correct." He ran his right index finger over his moustache.

"Hmm," said Rhiannon. "Very democratic."

The song on the radio changed, and the Youngbloods ironically urged us to get together and try to love one another. I glanced into the kitchen again. Meredith sat in absolute stillness, a stoic expression on her face. Grandpa Ted stared at the floor. Grandma Lucy gently stroked Meredith's neck, wincing from arthritic pain as she did so. Down the hall from us, in my parents' bedroom, Benny began to cry.

Beyond going to Wal-Mart for formula and diapers, Bill rarely acknowledged the baby's existence. He knew that Benny was not his son; he may have even known from the very beginning, but certainly he was aware of it for at least the five months before he left. When friends and relatives were over and Benny made a funny face or smiled or tried to put his tiny hand in his mouth, my father was the only person who wouldn't allow the joy to touch him. Even Ricky, in his own way, was fascinated by my little brother, but Bill seemed to want nothing to do with the son he hadn't helped to conceive..

Only one time did I see clear-cut evidence to the contrary. One winter morning I woke up early and headed from my bedroom to the bathroom. My mind was focused on the math test I'd be taking later that day, so at first it didn't register that Bill was sitting on the kitchen floor, facing the oven, holding Benny in his arms. Either he didn't notice me, or he pretended not to. I went to the bathroom, relieved myself. When I came out he was still there. I walked past him, and instead of going back to my room I stretched out on the

sofa. A few moments later I heard my father say, "I sure wish you didn't belong to somebody else. I sure do."

I snuck back to my room so he wouldn't realize I'd been there to hear.

It was Grandpa Ted who retrieved Benny from my parents' bedroom; he rocked the baby gently back and forth in his arms to stop him from crying. On the way through the living room Grandpa stopped, interrupting the silence of Ricky trying to decide.

"You owe the kids an explanation, William," he said to my father. "I don't know why on God's gorgeous green planet you're abandoning them, but you at least owe them an explanation." By now he'd stopped shaking in his fury, but the fury was visible in his wrinkled, normally blissful face.

Bill said, "I am handling this, Dad."

"I'm not your Dad. Not anymore. We're standing behind Meredith. Go to Glendale. Don't come back."

Grandpa Ted carried Benny (whose sobs had dissolved into light grunts as his mouth sucked on an imaginary pacifier) back to the kitchen. Rhiannon watched them go, then glared at Bill.

"That is not entirely my fault," Bill said, then lowered his voice so that only we could hear: "Now listen to me. I am not the guilty party here, but your Grandpa and Grandma will never believe Meredith's not a goddamn honest little angel so I will never tell them the truth. She's done things. She's done some horrible things to betray all of us."

"Skordos," I said. *Idiot!* I chided myself.

Bill cleared his throat. "You know about it," he said to me; not a question but a simple statement.

I didn't answer.

"I thought you might know something. You're always watching everyone; you're bound to put two and two together."

"I wish I couldn't see sometimes," I said.

"What?" Ricky said. "I don't get it. What did Meredith do?"

"Quiet, brainiac," said Bill, as the Who informed us they weren't about to get fooled again. "The important thing is I'm leaving her. But I don't want to leave you guys. I've saved up some money to get a good start until the new job gets going. This is the way it has to be. Ricky, are you coming with me or staying here?"

Ricky squirmed as if trying to get comfortable where he was sitting. He ran a finger up and down his pants leg. "Um," he said. "With you."

"One down," Bill said. "Good. Rhiannon?"

On his thirtieth birthday, my sister (then seven years old) woke him up at six in the morning with her vocal rendition of "Birthday" by the Beatles. Since that day she'd held a strong, apparently irreversible grudge against Bill because of his reaction.

She told the story to me many times. According to Rhiannon, Bill rubbed his eyes, stared blankly at her until she'd finished, then after the final "I'm glad it's your birthday... happy birthday to you!" he sat up, looked at Meredith lying next to him, and said, "We're putting a lock on that door as soon as I get home tonight." Then he got out of bed, clad in sweat bottoms and T-shirt, and walked right past Rhiannon to get ready for work.

They hadn't gotten along especially well since.

Rhiannon had plenty to say.

"It's probably a good thing you're leaving," she said, "since you hate everybody so much. I bet you're surprised I said that. I'm kinda surprised I said that. But you hate Meredith and you hate Grandma Ruth--she stopped coming over all the time because you

made fun of her, don't think I didn't notice that--and you hate all my friends and you hate me. I'm used to it, you know. But it'll be nice to get used to something else. Something different. Probably something better. You make everything hell and you don't care about us, except maybe for Ricky. Don't know why him though, he doesn't like you much either, or he didn't used to. You kinda hate Duncan, and I know you hate the baby--"

"I don't hate the baby," said Bill. "The baby's just not, not--"

"Able to take care of himself? Can't take care of himself so you have to do something? Even Duncan does more for that kid than you do, and he's a kid too. Just shut up. Just shut up and go away."

At this she herself stopped talking and went to the kitchen to hug Meredith. I could hear Meredith and Grandma Lucy crying a little, but as far as I know Rhiannon didn't shed a tear.

I've since noticed that in a lot of families the younger siblings get more privileges than the eldest did at their age. It didn't really work that way in my family. Ricky's bedroom was larger than either mine or Rhiannon's. He could stay up past nine to watch a war movie or a monster movie with Bill. Our parents set up a college fund for him when he was born, but up until Rhiannon was a Sophomore in high school, years later, there was no money set aside for any of the rest of us. Ironically Ricky would be the only one of us who never attended college. I never found out where his money went.

It may have been because Ricky was born almost three months early that he later received preferential treatment. Growing up I'd occasionally hear Meredith talking about, as she called him, "the one who almost got away." During the first year of his life Ricky had all kinds of health problems, difficulties he can't possibly remember now but which shaped his childhood. His heart was bad; he had seizures the doctors couldn't explain; his digestive system wasn't functioning properly; his weight was dangerously low. This last, the weight, may even explain why Meredith would always make sure he had huge portions

at dinner, even though he'd been pronounced healthy and well-nourished long before I was born.

Meredith focused attention on Ricky. Bill either ignored him or ridiculed him, which he did with all of us to a degree. Ricky chose to live with Bill instead of Meredith.

Over a decade later I told this to my psychology instructor in college. She stated flatly that Ricky had a self-hatred that caused him to seek out ridicule over praise.

Personally I think Ricky just wanted to get away from us.

"Well, we see where she stands," said Bill. "Ricky, what are you doing sitting here? Go pack your shit. I want to get home before midnight." I noticed he was already calling the apartment in Glendale "home."

I wanted to run. I did not want to be here. My heart pounded; the room seemed to blur and spin. A Beach Boys song came on, probably "In My Room" but I wasn't sure because every Beach Boys song sounds to me like at least three others. My father shut the radio off.

"Duncan?" Bill put a hand on my shoulder. "Do you want to live with me? It'll be a lot of fun. I'll let you read your books and write your stories and do all that weird stuff you do."

On some level I understood what he was doing. Now that his first child had chosen him, and his second had chosen Meredith, a lot was at stake with the third. I would be the tiebreaker. If I went with him, he'd win this battle. I didn't think of it in those words exactly, but the concept was frighteningly clear to me.

I started to cry.

Bill didn't know what to do with me when I cried. Generally he'd just give me to my mother (when I was younger) or call me a fairy (when I got a little older). He hadn't seen me cry in a long time; I'd made sure of that. But at that moment I just couldn't hold it back.

I sniffed, wiped tears off my face; they were replaced by more. "Reeny," I said, reverting back to my childhood name for her. The universe seemed to cease expanding. I wished I was a robot so I wouldn't have to feel like this.

Then Rhiannon stepped into the living room carrying my eleven-month-old brother. She stood over me, set Benny in my lap. He looked into my face and cooed. I saw Benny the Kid, grabbing my thumb with his elfin fingers as if it were a six-shooter.

Bill knew. He got up, turned to the kitchen, and announced to his wife and parents, "Well, I'm taking Ricky. It looks like you've got the others."

He got some cardboard boxes out of his truck. He threw some random objects into them. Ricky packed his suitcase. They stuffed the rest of Ricky's things into more boxes. They left.

Meredith changed Benny's diaper, but apart from that I held him the rest of the evening. Rhiannon went to her room, closed the door, turned the light off. Benny lay quietly in my arms, occasionally whimpering but mostly just watching me in silence. Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy sat on either side of us on the sofa for about forty minutes, just holding us both; their hugs were as comforting as the sunset drawn in Crayola by a child.

Storytime Catharsis

This is my stories journal. I'm going to write in it when I have time to & when I want to (that's a lot of the time by the way). My name is Duncan Pierce, I'm 9 years old & starting fourth grade tomorrow. I look up the words I dont know or not sure about so I don't misspell them wrong. Writing's my favorite thing. Listen to the blues is cool too.

Here's part of my story The Time Kids that I'm writing in my yellow notebook with the collegeruled lines. Rhiannon (my sister) said this is called an excerpt.

Mike Pinsky kept walking, didn't care of what his friends thought about him, if they called him names or what. His friends didnt think the railroad tracks was magic anyway, they'd be surprised! John was carryin Mike's basketball. John said "do you think theyll have hoops in the future?" Naomi (she was there too, she was their other friend) laughed, she thought John was funny. But Mike didn't care. They didn't believe him but theyd find out, yeah & they'd find out. There was the time fog, it was up ahead of him. Naomi and John walked on side of him. Mike said "here's the big moment coming up, watch this!" he grabbed one arm of each his friends & went in right through the time fog with CONFIDENCE.

They all wound up in this other time. John's eyes got big as the basketball of Mike's and said "man I guess you were right!" He looked a long time at the pyramids that was in Egypt back in the past. Mike didnt brag that he was right, he was just glad it worked & they was in BC times. Naomi coughed, and again, "I feel sick" she said. "I got sick from the time fog." John said "well get you to a doctor" and Mike said "no the

doctors in pyramids times were not very good. Naomi said she'd be okay & the 3 friends went to the city to explore!

Later lots later, been a few days ago I wrote all that. The Time Kids is about 30 pages & still writing it. Schultz said he likes it alot & Nim wants the Naomi girl in it to be the big hero. Oops, a girl hero is a heroine. I forgot.

I like Stacy Jones. Shes pretty. I kissed her when we was just kids. Schultz said I oughta ask her out. I never will let anybody else read this, not a part. None of it. This is my stories journal.

The old man had a suitcase, he opened it, it was green. He took a little remote out. He'd got stung by a wasp in his backyard. It hurt to write, the sting was on back of his writing hand. He said "can't have that" he was writing a book. He lived all by himself, no parents getting a DIVORCE & no phones no lights no motor cars. Just him & his typewriter and I think a little dog.

He pressed... the button. & a little green light blinked off and on and off. A beam shot out of the machine and the sting healed up. The old man (his name was Buster) laughed, he was happy. Buster wrote a whole long chapter & it felt great. He got an idea.

He drove uptown by Mr. Skordos's old place that got torn down and they were putting up a McDonalds, all the gangs hung out there & drank beer. 6 big guys in leather black jackets were there, their leader was Rocco that had a lot of hair. The old man got out of his car & said "hello." Rocco got ready to hit him, he didnt like old people & made a mean face but Buster pressed the... button again. Rocco didnt hit him. He said "sorry oh hi what's your name?" & Buster said "Buster" so Rocco bought him a beer but Buster didn't like beer so Rocco got him an ice tea. The machine made people

happy so Buster went around town & made everybody happier. Then when McDonalds opened up the next week he bought the whole town some Big macs.

Nim said Stacy likes me. I said cool.

I got to be with Benny at the circus. Benny's just one year old, he likes to play & Meredith showed him the elephants and some funny clowns. A clown said to me "I have big feet, do you want to try on my shoes" so I did. It was fun but I couldn't walk in the clown shoes & they were smelly alot. Then we saw Schultz and Doug, we ate popcorn & threw it at people till Meredith made us stop. Rhiannon went to her friend Jill's house, she didnt go to the circus. Schultz said "tell her I said hi" and I said cool again.

The planet, was full of sand on the ground. The temperature was 110 degrees in the shade, frying eggs and bacon on a sidewalk. Rory was stuck there from the ship crash & he was ready to die.

He was dyin from thirst (he didnt have water) & needed cold water. He forgot where his spaceship was & it was a big planet, he walked all over to find food. His radio stopped working so he couldn't send for help.

Then Rory saw her, she was an alien, taller than he was. She had yellow hair & she was so pretty, she looked like human except for antennas on her head & purple skin. But Rory said she was pretty anyhow. She was sitting by a lake & he thought she (and the lake) were not real but he was wrong, they were real.

He was afraid to talk to the girl so he didnt but then he got thirsty the next day, & went back. She laughed at him. He said "what's so funny" & she said "you" but she was alien so she spoke an alien LANGUAGE. She tried to learn English but it sounded all wrong. He talked to her anyhow. She laughed alot but learned a few words. Rory drank alot of the lake.

Then the girl said "go away", he laughed but she said it again "go away, shut up & go away"

Rory got mad & left, he didn't know what the alien girl's problem was so he found his ship & fixed it & took off for earth.

Next flight out he took it, with seven other people. They wound up on the same planet again, one more time. Rory found the girl again but time went different on the planet & now she was an old woman, so he just left her there.

Grandma Ruth (Meredith's mom) comes over alot now, she does crossword puzzles & thinks my grandpa's there with her. Uncle Jim wont take good care of her now cause he has a girlfriend & he's not around much. Grandma's losing it. She said Rhiannon is Meredith when Meredith was 13. Thats just weird. She wears dark glasses in the house like blues singers but she's not blind like some of them. I just got my glasses, I wear them to read & not in P.E. though or they'd get scratched up or broke. Thats what Meredith said.

And the bald alien leader gave Mike & John & Naomi wine to drink, he said "you can drink all you want and not get drunk, that's how it is in the future." Naomi said how weird it was they went to Egypt & ancient Rome and Middle Ages and about got killed every time but in the future they were treated real good. The bald leader said "you are primitives but you are charming primitives" & they all drank. Naomi wasnt sick anymore & John said "you aliens must be SUPERHUMANS!" John drank alot & then Mike looked at him & saw John's hair fell out, he was bald..

Meredith read part of The Time Kids up to the part where Mike & John & Naomi drink the wine & start getting older, until theyre 200 years old. Meredith said "thats disgusting" cause I wrote that their hair fell out & they got liver spots and real long

fingernails and toenails. I said "but is it good" & she said "I have to give Benny his bottle" & I made faces at Benny when Meredith gave him his bottle, he laughed.

There was a snake, he gave Eve an apple & she ate it, everybody knows that. But they dont know the snake had a lawyer named Bernie, he defended the snake to a jury of angels and demons. Bernie argued real good, he said "nobody did nothing wrong, if you think they did youre BLIND". The judge said "this case is dismissed" & Adam & Eve & the snake could all stay in the garden of Eden. Later Cain killed Abel & they all had to leave the garden anyway.

Schultz & Doug & I went skating with people from children's church. Our youth minister Ed drove us to Skateway, we had a lot of fun. Taylor Ellis was there & he prayed before he put his skates on, turns out he's a terrible skater. Some kid out on the floor knocked me down & I got up to punch his lights out but Ed stopped me, he said "God doesn't want you to hurt people" & so I didn't but I kept my eye on that kid that knocked me down anyhow cause I didnt trust him not to do it again.

Taylor fell down alot. He prayed alot, got up, & fell down again. Schultz skated by him (Schultz can skate real good) & said "hey Taylor why don't you quit!" but Taylor said "I never quit nothing" & Schultz said "okay man dont get your panties in a wad", that was pretty funny.

The bald leader said "you are safe" & John screamed "safe! we're 200 years old!" Naomi's teeth fell out & she said "we want to be us again" and I said "we will die" & John said "change us back change us back CHANGE US BACK!!"

John kept screamin then he jumped up on the table & grabbed the leader by the neck & squeezed. The leader started to choke, his air was blocked & his green eyes bulged & teardrops came out. Naomi yelled "John let go" & the bald alien leader tried

to get away & John let go and the bald alien leader & the other superhumans gave them a 2nd wine that made them back to normal. But they had bad dreams alot after that & real bad headaches.

What happened then?

I'm writing my stories journal & I know alot of times but not this time. I dont know what happens in the future or in Duncanworld where my stories take place.

Can I pray, wish, & it'll turn out okay for people I make up?

It's scary I'm stuck. Alot of times I just keep writing but I cant think now.

I got a book about writing. It said ask yourself what your story's about.

What's my story about?

Maybe it's the wrong story. Maybe the right story, but nobody wants to read it.

I'm 9 & in fourth grade. Stacy's my girlfriend, she has pretty eyes. The teacher said I am a good writer but I need to do better in school, & not make things up so much.

But I can't stop. All I want is to know what happens next.

Once upon a time there was a prince. A long long time ago, in a galaxy far far away the knights played kickball. Gettysburg, and all the soldiers. I wrote down every word ever & it didn't matter. Nothing happened & nobody cared & all the people I made up lived happy ever after.

What happened then?

My name is Duncan Pierce.

Tara

Eighteen, a Freshman in college. Hair parted down the middle, cut almost as short as mine, dyed such a light blond that it was almost white. Tara Newman consumed my consciousness for an entire season, the fall of my fourth-grade year. I wrote her name in my notebooks, drew pictures for her, tried to compose poetry about her but never could make the words come out in quite the right way on the page. I was always a sci-fi writer; in all my life I've written only two poems, and neither of them had anything to do with Tara. Even so, though the words couldn't be forced into flowery perfection the way I wanted them to, the emotions were there.

She never would have entered my life had it not been for the fact that Ricky had departed from it. His room was lying vacant at a time when Meredith desperately needed some extra money coming in. She tossed around the idea of renting it out for most of the preceding summer, then finally decided she had little choice if she wanted to keep making house payments and letting us eat. Nobody we knew needed a place to live, so she was left having to advertise for some stranger. The college fall semester was starting soon. She geared her ad toward a female college student: she refused to take in a male because she claimed that Rhiannon was getting to the age where she couldn't trust her.

My sister, at fourteen, was beginning to stir up some interest from several of the older boys in town. But you'd never have known it once Tara Newman arrived on the scene.

"Where ya want me puttin' my stuff, Mrs. Pierce?" She carried a large suitcase and a painting of what looked to me like deflated clocks draped over a landscape. At least four more suitcases sat on the porch, directly behind her as she stood just inside the front door..

Already I was in love, though I didn't realize it until later. My girlfriend was Stacy Jones, who was actually my age and in my class at school. Stacy and I had little in common; she'd simply laid claim to me the week the circus came to town, and I'd shrugged and said okay. She never really said a lot to me. We were boyfriend and girlfriend almost in name only, and no big deal.

"Your room is between Rhiannon's and Duncan's," my mother said. Meredith wore a pale blue sweatsuit and jogging shoes. A sudden exercise kick was her latest method of reinventing herself in the wake of her divorce from Bill. "We're glad to have you here, Tara. I hope you enjoy it here."

Tara looked at my sister. "You in high school?" she said.

Rhiannon shook her head. "Eighth grade."

"What do you do?"

"A lot of studying worthless crap."

Tara offered her a cockeyed grin. "Wish I could say that'll change. Kay. What do you like to do?"

"I'm in chorus," Rhiannon said.

"Sing something for us, Rhiannon," I said.

"Nah."

Tara's grin expanded as she turned to me. "You do anything cool?"

"Yeah," I said. "Of course."

Everyone else laughed. I didn't see the humor until I thought about it later.

"I want to be a writer," I added.

“Duncan Man,” she said (she called me Duncan Man right from the start, as if she could instantly see through my secret identity to some inner superhero), “don’t say you *want* to be a writer. Say you are.” This last, almost a whisper. “See, I’m an English major. We’re unprotected, vulnerable to the world. We gotta let ourselves be seen, let ourselves be hurt. Can’t be ashamed of anything.” She winked and headed for her new room to arrange it as she saw fit.

Tara took my sister and me to McDonald’s the next day after school. She said she wanted to get to know us, to find out what made us tick. At first we found out more about her.

“--psychology,” she was saying to Rhiannon as I came back from the men’s room. “It was that, or English ed. But I’m not cut out to be a counselor. I’d never have the patience to help people through their crap.”

“You’d be a good teacher,” said Rhiannon.

“Yeah?” Tara grinned.

“Yeah. You really seem like you like people. That’ll get through to kids quicker than anything.”

“The food isn’t here yet,” I said.

Tara said, “They’re still holding on fries. Duncan Man, I’ll tell ya, I will never work at a McDonald’s again. I did it for almost a year. The manager kept hittin’ on me and his wife was oblivious. Ended up walking out, and then they withheld my last paycheck.”

“They can’t do that!” said Rhiannon.

“They said I gave away too many free meals. Doesn’t matter. My last check was just for three hours anyway.”

A skinny, curly-haired kid of about Tara’s age brought our tray to us. He apologized for the wait.

"It's okay, man, I'm workin' on losing a few pounds," said Tara.

The employee stopped. "What?"

"You know. You said you were sorry for the wait. Wait, weight, you know. It's a pun, man."

"Oh. Yeah." He blushed a little. "I didn't think you had to worry about your weight." Tara was almost as thin as this kid was.

"You flirtin' with me--" she glanced at his name tag, "Kenny?"

"Yeah, kinda," Kenny said.

"You're cute." Tara scribbled down a few digits on a napkin. "Here's my number. Don't lose it, you don't get a second chance."

Kenny stared at my cheeseburger for a few seconds, then looked back at her. "I'll call you," he said, and scrambled back to his spot behind the counter, in front of which there were several customers waiting.

"Sometimes ya gotta give 'em a boost," Tara said to Rhiannon. She took a bite of chicken nugget, then spoke around it. "You got a boyfriend?"

"No. All the guys at school are jerks. Immature, laughing-at-their-own-farts jerks."

"They'll grow up someday. In the meantime, date an older guy."

I felt I had little to contribute to the conversation.

"How 'bout you, Duncan Man? You makin' any lucky chicks smile?"

I sipped my Coke before answering. "Stacy."

"Stacy, huh?" Tara grinned. "Duncan and Stacy. That's sweet, man." She reached over the table, her sleeve just missing a small pile of ketchup, to touch the side of my face with her palm.

A little girl, no more than about five, walked over to us from the line still forming in front of Kenny at the counter. Her dimples deepened as she smiled at us.

"Hi," she said.

"Hello!" said Tara.

A young blond woman with dark-rimmed glasses was watching the little girl. "Ashley," she said, then turned to Kenny to place her order. Beside her stood a very short three-year-old boy, who stared at the floor, his face almost completely hidden by a Cardinals cap too big for his head.

Little Ashley looked up at Rhiannon. "I'm gonna run around this store, fast like Road Runner."

"Cool," Rhiannon said. "Be careful you don't run into anything."

"And then I'm gonna play Tag."

"Cool," Rhiannon said again, reaching for a French fry.

"And then I'm gonna kick my brother in the nuts."

"ASHLEY JANE!!" her mother screamed; everyone stared at her. Tara snickered. Rhiannon shook her head, trying not to smile.

Ashley seemed to have no idea what she'd just said, or why a hush had fallen over the crowded restaurant. Her mother made sure she knew, loudly and in no uncertain terms, exactly what she'd done wrong and why it was wrong. Ashley's brother kept looking at the floor.

"Hilarious," Tara said to us. "Completely hilarious."

Rhiannon smirked. "Duncan used to go up to strange women in Wal-Mart and ask if they had their 'pantyhoses' on."

Tara laughed. "And did they?" she said, turning to look at me.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't even remember it. She made it up, I think."

"Oh, wrong!" my sister said. "You can ask Meredith."

Ashley's mother was still yelling at her, even as she paid for their food.

"Jeez," said Tara. "Poor kid. She didn't kill her brother, she just threatened to make his next few minutes uncomfortable."

Very uncomfortable, I thought.

"I guarantee you that woman was a cheerleader in high school," Tara said.

"How do you figure that?" Rhiannon asked.

"She's too easily embarrassed. Too worried what everybody else thinks around her. Probably gets a bee in her butt every time somebody ignores her."

"They're not all like that, are they?" I said. "Cheerleaders."

"No," said Rhiannon. "Jill's sister's a cheerleader, and she's really cool."

"The exception that proves the rule."

"That's what you learn when you go to school," I said, proud of my spontaneous rhyme.

"You a poet?" Tara asked.

I shook my head. "I just write stories."

"Yeah, he's pretty good," said Rhiannon.

"Tell Meredith that."

My sister swallowed the last of her grilled chicken sandwich. "Meredith is too busy trying to figure out who she is to know who we are."

"First year of the divorce?"

Rhiannon nodded.

Tara blinked. "First year of the divorce. Eecch. I went through all that. Only I went with my dad instead of my mom. Mom was psycho, man. Kept claiming she was gonna cheat on Dad."

"Ours did cheat," Rhiannon said.

Tara closed her eyes. "Goddammit, I'm sorry, you guys. That really bites."

"Yeah. Meredith says we're all going to therapy soon. I think Duncan and I are just fine without it but she should definitely go."

"Maybe Grandma Ruth could go with her," I said.

Rhiannon shrugged. "Couldn't hurt."

"You guys are so damn stoic," Tara said. "Man, I cried for like ten months straight. Course I was only six, but still."

Kenny came back out, his customers having been served. He carried a wet washcloth. "Hey," he whispered, "what's your name?"

"Tara. Call after eight. You can interrupt my homework, do me a favor."

Kenny nodded, then started wiping down tables.

"For the next three hours he'll be rehearsing what he's going to say to me," Tara said. "Let's get out of here, guys."

We dumped the trash off our trays into the garbage, then walked past Ashley and her family as we were leaving. I noticed that Ashley's mom was sitting between the two children. *That kid's nuts are safe for now*, I thought.

Kenny didn't last long. He came over to pick up Tara exactly twice. When she got back from the second date, I heard her tell Meredith that she didn't want to see Kenny anymore because all he did was talk about cars. Two days later another guy about Tara's age came to the door looking for her. His name was either Mark or Mike; it doesn't matter because he was around for even less time than Kenny had been: twenty minutes to be exact. Tara stormed into the house; we heard Mark or Mike's motorcycle propelling him away. She told us all that he'd called her a slut. I was about to ask what a slut was, but Meredith escorted Tara out of the kitchen before I could.

There were others. Tara wasn't one for being without a boyfriend of some sort. One of them was already familiar to me: he worked at the video store. His name was Alex. Alex managed to keep himself in Tara's good graces the longest of all her boyfriends that we met (five weeks). I was part of the reason for his departure, though I didn't mean to be.

On this particular evening Tara was waiting for Alex to pick her up. Rhiannon was working on her homework; I'd already finished mine and was busy trying to draw a

picture of a robot. Just as I was deciding to give up on the drawing and write a story about a robot instead, Tara tapped on my door, poked her head in, and said, "Come on, Duncan Man. Get your shoes on."

I set my notebook down beside me on my bed. "Wh-huh?"

"You're coming with us."

"On your date?"

Tara grinned; whenever she did that I just wanted to jump up and kiss her right on the mouth. "Rhiannon's coming too. You guys seem kinda down lately so I figure, I gotta do somethin' to get you back up. We're all going for pizza!"

"Pizza?"

"Get your shoes."

Alex greeted me as I got into the back seat, Rhiannon following me. "Hey."

"Hey," I said.

"Alex, this is so cool you guys are doing this for us!" Rhiannon said.

"Yeah," said Alex, who apparently didn't think it was all that cool himself.

"Yeah, Tara... just... now thought of it."

Tara leaned over from the front passenger seat, gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Thanks, Al. Yeah, anything for my two favorite people!"

I felt a light glow building in my stomach.

We went to Ziggy's, ate more than our fill of pizza. Tara paid. She talked to Rhiannon and me the whole evening. From the time we entered Ziggy's to the time we got back into Alex's car, he didn't say a word.

As we pulled up to the house, he mumbled something to Tara. She motioned for us to go on, then rolled her window up after we got out so we couldn't hear what they were saying. They sat there, parallel-parked in front of the house, for a long time. I was just brushing my teeth to go to bed when she came back in.

"He's a... fucking jerk," I heard her tell my mother.

"You were out there for two hours," Meredith said to her. "That doesn't look good to my kids."

"Yeah, well, you won't have to worry about it anymore. I sent him packing."

"Tara, I'm just going to say it, and the hell with it. I think you're leading these boys on."

I spat water into the sink, not too loudly.

"Depends on your point of view, Mrs. P," Tara said. "I'm just being who I am. If they don't like it, they can't change me. I'll tell 'em just what I think, I'm not a shy person."

Meredith said, "Running around with every guy you see isn't going to help anybody."

Tara was silent for several seconds. Finally she said, "He's just... he's just a fucking jerk."

I heard her stepping down the hall, slowly. I turned the bathroom light off, timing it just right so I'd walk directly past her as we went to our respective rooms.

We made eye contact. She whispered, "I'm sorry but I think your mom is a hypocrite."

"It's okay," I whispered, and because I couldn't think of anything else to say I added, "The pizza was great, thank you."

It took me a long time to get to sleep that night.

The end-of-October breeze rustled our costumes as we walked along the sidewalk toward the center of town. Bentleyville was not large by any standards, but you could still make quite a haul in treats if you managed to cover a lot of ground. This was the first Halloween without Ricky, meaning it was also the first year I'd actually get to eat all of my own candy. Meredith had been a bit surprised that I wanted to go Trick-or-Treating; for some reason she thought that nine was too old to go. Even so, she'd ended up buying

me a Dracula costume, the cape of which I kept stepping on because it was too big, the fangs of which I couldn't stand because I had trouble talking around them. I trudged onward with my friends anyway.

Stacy kept trying to hold my hand. She wore a white karate outfit and had her hair tied back in a ponytail. "Duncan, we can hold hands, you silly," she protested after about the sixth time I unclenched from her and wandered to the other end of the group to walk with Doug, who was dressed as a pudgy Yoda and repeatedly said Yoda-like things: "Going Trick-or-Treating, we are." "Eat lots of candy, I like to." Stacy sighed and turned to talk to Taylor Ellis, who wore a three-piece suit and said he was disguised as his father, the Preacher. Nim insisted that it was against the law to pretend to be a minister; she was a fortunetelling gypsy and her fake crystal ball kept slipping out of her hands. Schultz was the only one of us not wearing a costume, but he'd made a deal with Nim that he'd carry her Trick-or-Treat bag if she'd share her candy with him. He tried to say something to me, to make a joke or something, but Stacy pushed him out of the way and grabbed my left hand and tried to pull me along the sidewalk. I let her. Actually I barely noticed she was there because I was lost in my thoughts.

"Trick or Treat!" everyone but me said.

"Look at all these wonderful costumes," said an old lady in a green dress who gave each of us a popcorn ball.

"Sorry," said a pudgy bald man, "we're out of candy. Heh. Just kidding, here ya go," and he tossed some Reese's Peanut Butter cups into our sacks.

"Daddy!" screamed a small girl who ran as soon as she opened the door and saw us, leaving her father to pass out generous handfuls of Tootsie Rolls and chuckle, "Hannah's got stage fright, she's not used to giving out treats. Poor kid's got the flu so she's staying in tonight." Doug handed the man a Reese's cup and a popcorn ball from his bag and told him Hannah could have them.

“Trick or Treat!” my friends kept saying; I said it occasionally but my heart wasn’t in it.

“Trick or Treat, Trick or Treat, Trick or Treat!”

And then I felt Stacy’s hand in mine, her fingers squeezing my knuckles. I liked her and everything, but at that moment I just wanted her to go as far away as possible.

I yanked my hand away, kept walking, staring straight ahead.

“Duncan!” Stacy said.

“Hey boss, what’s your problem?” asked Schultz.

“Nothing,” I said.

Nobody spoke for a minute. We all headed along toward Linden Street. There were fewer porch lights on, though, so we’d probably be turning back soon.

Then Nim was beside me, thrusting her crystal ball at Schultz to hold. She tapped me on the arm. “Duncan? Are you okay? Why are you being mean?”

“What?” I said, still not looking at her or anyone else.

“Why are you being mean to Stacy?”

“Because she’s not Tara!” I blurted out.

I didn’t even know what I meant by that until after I’d said it.

“Duncan,” said Nim again, in a stern voice that somehow also managed to be sensitive.

I ran home.

It was about eight blocks, in the dark, just me all alone except for a bunch of nameless, faceless goblins and princesses and witches and Frankenstein’s monsters. I only stopped once, when I realized I’d dropped my bag of treats somewhere; whoever found it would just have to enjoy it, because I wasn’t going back. I ran in through the front door, past Rhiannon giving Benny his bottle and rocking him, past Meredith reading an issue of *People* on the sofa, past the open door to Tara’s room and into my own. I slammed the door, jumped onto my bed, buried my face in the pillow.

A few seconds later, a knock.

"Duncan Man."

I answered in spite of myself: "Tara... Woman."

"I'm coming in."

"You can't," I said.

"You didn't lock the door. So yeah, I can."

I hid under my covers, as if that would trick her into thinking I wasn't there.

Then Tara was standing over my bed, and I sensed Meredith in the room too.

"Your cape is torn," said my mother.

"I'm sorry. Okay? I'm sorry about the stupid cape." My voice was muffled by the pillow, but I didn't bother to clarify my words.

"Don't worry about the stupid cape," Meredith said. "Look at me."

I didn't.

"Fine, don't look at me. Will you look at Tara, at least?"

I wouldn't.

"Duncan, you'll hurt my feelings if you don't want to look at me." Tara sniffed--she'd been complaining that she was getting a cold--then said, "Don't you think I'm pretty enough to look at, Duncan Man?"

"No," I lied.

"Ouch," said Tara.

Meredith whispered something to Tara about how I was kidding, I didn't know what I was saying, I didn't usually act like this.

"It's okay," Tara said to both of us. "You wanna talk about it?"

I pretended to snore.

Tara snickered.

"Yeah, that's gonna fool us," said Meredith. "Duncan, I don't want to see my baby boy sad. Look at me."

I raised up, stared her in the eyes. "Way to act like a mom for once."

Meredith stared back, silently. She got up and left the room.

Tara said, "Duncan, what the hell are you doing?"

I creased my eyebrows at her. "Huh? You're the one said she was a hypocrite."

"Well, yeah, she kind of is. But you have to pick the right moment to show her you're pissed, or else you just look stupid."

"I wanna be by myself," I said abruptly.

"Kay. I'll talk to you tomorrow." And Tara left the room too, shutting off the light and closing the door behind her.

Twenty minutes later I opened the door and stepped down the hall, my eyes squinting automatically from the brightness of the living-room lamps, and then I was in my mother's lap leaning the back of my head against her right shoulder.

"Duncan Man, huh?" she said.

"It's your turn," said Uncle Jim. He sat in our kitchen two days before Thanksgiving, sipping a sugar-filled cup of coffee and staring down my mother. Rhiannon and I were silent, watching, wondering what would happen next.

"We don't have room."

"Ricky's old room."

"It's spoken for," Meredith said--but something on her face argued with that claim.

"Meredith, I can't keep track of her anymore. She wanders all over the neighborhood, I don't know what the hell she's up to, I can't keep track of her. You gotta take her."

I looked at Rhiannon.

"I've had her for *seven years!*" Uncle Jim said, loudly, more insistently.

My mother sighed. Shook her head. "I can't deal with this right now, I can't deal with this..."

"Well, you have to. I'm out of it. I'm a nervous wreck. You, you got three people here to look after her. I'm all by myself, afraid to even leave the house. So you're taking her. Mom!"

Grandma Ruth was in the living room, staring at a spot on the dark blue window curtain.

"For Christ's sake." Uncle Jim left the kitchen, came back a few moments later with his mother, while my mother somehow managed to summon up a smile from the depths of herself.

"Mom, you'll be staying here a while. I'm gonna go back to the house and pack up your stuff."

Grandma Ruth glared around the room, almost as if she didn't know where she was. She seemed to have lost a lot of weight in the past few months; I hadn't realized it until just then. Most of the weight had left her face, which was extremely pale and wrinkled. Her eyes were a beady dark brown, but when the light hit them just right they looked strangely orange.

She addressed each of us:

"Why, Meredith the Melancholy," she said. "Glad I could stop by and see you. Sherman always says, 'Ruth, let's get our rickety carcasses over there and see Meredith.' And he's right! He can't be here right now, he's working, heh. There's my precious little Rhiannon Aladdin. Just like the forty thieves story I used to tell ya, remember? You sat down on my knee but I think if you sat there now you'd break it, you're growing up so tall and beautiful! And that, that can't be my little pesky boy, can it? Duncan Spelunkin', likes to explore the mountains and the caves. There was another one though, heh, there was another one." She left the room for a minute, wandered around the house. She came

back. "You got a baby! You know you got a baby in there sleepin'? Wasn't him though. Ricky! Ricky the Rowdy Howdy, where's he at?"

Uncle Jim put a hand on Grandma Ruth's shoulder as she sat down across from Meredith at the table. "Ricky left. With Bill. I told ya, remember?"

Grandma Ruth was quiet for a moment, then said, "We got ourselves a little party here, heh. Well, I gotta get goin' though, it was good seeing everybody..."

"Mom." Uncle Jim moved himself around to face her, put his hands on the sides of her face. "You are staying here. With Meredith and the kids. I'll bring your stuff. I gotta go."

Grandma Ruth looked at me. "Your Uncle Jim's bein' a pesky boy too! Well, you be careful, Jimmy John. I wanna take a nap."

"You can sleep on my bed, Mom," said Meredith. Grandma Ruth headed for Meredith's room.

"Meredith," Rhiannon said, "what about Tara?"

Meredith shrugged. "It's just been a crazy day," she said.

Tara didn't take the news so well at first.

"Whatever happened to some fricking notice? Like I'm gonna be able to find a new place to live before it gets dark tonight?"

Meredith shrugged; she was doing a lot of that lately. "I'm sorry, but family comes first. My mother's got dementia, she's sick, I'm worried about her. I'll even pay for you a hotel room for a few days if that helps."

"My finals are coming up. I don't have time for this shit."

"Do you have any friends you can stay with?" Meredith asked, hopefully.

"Just one," said Tara, "but he'd probably just jump on me as soon as I walked in the door. Horny prick."

"Why do we need her to leave?" I asked. "She can sleep in my room."

Rhiannon snickered. "Duncan, you're a little too young for that."

I rolled my eyes. "No, I'll sleep on the couch. I don't care. That way she doesn't have to move out till her school's out."

"It's only two or three weeks before the college semester is over," said Rhiannon.

"Two," said Tara. "Duncan Man, you're beautiful."

I blushed.

Meredith said, "You'd have to stay out of my mother's way. And don't take anything she says personally. She doesn't know what she's saying."

"She can't say anything worse than my mom said."

Meredith smiled a little. "Duncan, you sure you don't mind giving up your room for a while?"

I shook my head. *God, no.*

Stacy and I had stopped talking for a while after my Halloween-night outburst, but all of a sudden on the Monday after Thanksgiving she stopped at my desk after lunch. "I heard your Grandma's moving in."

"She already did. Yeah."

"Tara's moving out?" Now her voice was hopeful.

I nodded. "She probably won't be around very much now."

Stacy looked around for the teacher, saw that it was safe, and took my hand. "I'll be your girlfriend if Tara's moving out."

"Sure," I said. Stacy was still my friend, after all, and if it made her happy to call herself my girlfriend, who was I to argue?

"Great. Bye." She moved back a couple rows and sat down.

Nim was the only other person who had been mad at me for being mean to Stacy, but when Stacy and I made up, she finally stopped giving me the silent treatment. It was really good to talk to her again.

"Grandma's sick," I said to her as we were walking home that day. "Mind-sick."

"Mind-sick?" said Nim.

"Meredith says she's got dimensions, or something. Maybe you get mind-sick if you have more than three dimensions."

"No, *dementia*, Duncan," Nim said. "It means she's senile. She thinks things that aren't true."

"Yeah, like Grandpa Sherman's still alive."

"We should do something nice for her."

The thought hadn't occurred to me. "Okay," I said. "What do we do?"

"We could read her some stories. Even just sit with her and spend some time with her. My mom says old people like that. We could do that."

"We could," I said.

But it took us a while to get around to it. Either Nim and Miss Rainer had to go shopping, or Meredith wanted us all to go with her when she took Benny to see Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy, or Grandma Ruth was having one of her off days--it was beginning to seem like we'd never find the time for stories and old-people conversation. I wasn't really all that excited about it anyway; Grandma still scared me a little and I wanted to be around Tara as much as I could until the semester ended and she left.

On the Tuesday afternoon of Tara's finals week, I couldn't find Nim after school to walk home with her. This was the day she was supposed to come over, but she was nowhere to be found. I decided she must have gone home with her mother for once and that I shouldn't worry about it. I walked home by myself, scheming out ways of getting alone with Tara and maybe telling her how I felt about her without chickening out. She'd be gone in two days; I had to hurry.

She was the only one in the house when I got home. I heard her rummaging around in her room, door closed, probably packing so she wouldn't have to take on that

Herculean task after her last English final on Thursday. "Hey!" I called, standing outside the door.

"Duncan Man!" she said. "We're going out to eat, kiddo."

This was going to be easier than I thought! "Just, just me and you?"

"Everybody else is being wet blankets in the mud," she said with a wink in her voice. "They went to your Grandpa Ted's. Rhiannon's gonna be back later, she went to Jill's. Mrs. P said I had to track down your supper, so we're going for steaks!" She opened the door, and a startling blur of flesh and panties and bra rushed by. "Gotta get my laundry out of the dryer!" she said, heading for the back porch. I heard her open the dryer, rustle around for clothes. "Duncan Man, your robot stories are great, you gotta get them published, man! Get busy!" I heard a noise behind me, turned to see Nim and Taylor standing there. Tara's voice continued from the porch: "Dammit, I can't find my blue top. Oh wait, it's on my floor. Airhead." She stepped up the hall, still in her bra and underwear. Taylor covered his eyes; Nim glared. I didn't move.

"I thought we were reading to your Grandma," Taylor said to me. "Maybe we should read her the *Bible*."

"What?" said Tara, looking back at us. "Oh! Yeah, right. Whatever. You see chicks wearing less on the beach. No big deal." She went back into her room and shut the door. She talked a little more but by then Taylor and Nim were both gone and I was left wondering what had just happened.

Tara treated me to a chopped sirloin and fries at Bonanza. I told her about my stories. She told me I'd be a great writer when I grew up, that I was a sweet kid. I laughed, made stupid jokes, thought about how gorgeous she was, and realized there was absolutely no way I'd ever make her mine.

When she left that Thursday, she took all of her stuff except for the Salvador Dali painting--the picture of clocks deflated over the barren landscape. I moved it from her room to my own. I grieved over her absence for a few days, then pretty much snapped

out of it, except at nights when I wondered where she was and what would've happened if I'd met her and she hadn't seen me as a little brother but as a man.

Taylor told Stacy about Tara walking around my house in her underwear. Stacy didn't speak to me for a long time after that.

Dunce

Meredith couldn't stop saying we were going to be late, that we didn't want to get the new school year off to a bad start. It was as if she thought we'd never attended school before and needed a few tips to get by on. Benny babbled, "Bad start!" in a chirpy voice that he reserved for moments of unbridled anticipation; he repeated it, "Bad start bad start bad start Dunca Reeny bad start!" until Meredith set a bowl of Rice Krispies down in front of him. Rhiannon stomped back and forth across the kitchen, stopping only to smirk at the milky mess Benny was already starting to make of his high chair tray. Bacon fried on the stove. I adjusted my glasses and turned a page in my "Encyclopedia Brown" book. Rhiannon fussed with her hair in the bathroom. She'd just had it cut the day before, and she said the lady who cut it did a crappy job and left the bangs uneven. I couldn't tell because she wouldn't stop moving around long enough to see.

Five knocks on the back door. Schultz.

"What's he doing up so early?" Rhiannon asked.

Meredith sighed. "Tell him you're not ready yet. Just getting your breakfast done now."

She removed my scrambled eggs from the skillet with a spatula, set them on my plate.

I opened the back door. "Hey, Schultz."

"How's it goin', boss?" He was wearing jeans torn at the knees and a plain green T-shirt with no sleeves. He liked to say the shirt showed off his muscles.

"I don't know yet," I said. "Getting ready to eat. Do you want some eggs?"

Meredith's voice from inside: "We don't have any more!"

"Hi," Schultz called back to her. "What's up her butt?" he muttered.

I laughed. "Aw, nothin'. I don't know. She keeps harping on us she doesn't want us to be late. First day of school, I guess."

"Tell her to suck your butt."

I opened my mouth, put a hand to my face. "Hey Meredith--"

Schultz grabbed my arm, shook his head. "Don't be an Opie."

Rhiannon pushed me lightly aside and headed out the back door, nodding to Schultz as she left.

"She's lookin' kinda hot," Schultz said.

"She's mad because she got a bad haircut."

"I think it makes her look sexy."

We stepped back into the kitchen. I sat down and proceeded to wolf down my eggs and bacon.

As I ate, Schultz played with Benny, pushing the kid's Matchbox cars across the linoleum while Benny giggled with glee. Meredith said something about a surprise she had for Rhiannon and me after school. I asked if it was ice cream she'd be surprising us with. She told me it had nothing to do with ice cream and I'd better finish my eggs pretty damn quickly or else I'd be late getting to school.

About that time Benny stopped giggling, looked at me, and said, "You stay home wif me."

He stared up at me with bright, dry eyes and ordered me again to stay home.

"You heard the kid," Schultz said to my mother. "Guess Duncan ain't goin' nowhere."

Meredith picked up a butter knife, pretended to threaten Schultz with it. "You're both getting on your way and out of my kitchen before I pull a Norman Bates on you."

"Sorry, Benny," I said, "I gotta go to school." I picked up my Trapper Keeper.

He shook his head. "Stay home wif me. We c'n play. You home, Dunca. You an' Show."

Schultz got to his feet. "What're we gonna play, Benny-boss?"

"Cars an' run around an' all the--" Benny jumped up and down, squealing the rest of his sentence in a dialect we weren't familiar with.

"I'll play with you after school, Ben," I said. I leaned down and hugged him. He didn't hug back--not with his arms--but he did make a happy noise.

"We c'n play," Benny said, watching us step out the door.

"We'll play," I said.

Somehow we caught up to Rhiannon, who was talking to some guy with a huge head and a spiky haircut. Schultz tried to interrupt with a joke, but she didn't laugh so we started walking again.

We got to the playground and stopped to talk to Nim and Stacy. A few moments later Rhiannon was rushing toward the buses already waiting at the curb. The huge-head guy joined two other guys with slightly smaller heads. Rhiannon started to get on the middle school bus, then stopped herself and headed for the high school bus instead.

"Dude, what's her problem?" Schultz asked me. "All the women in your family're going crazy!"

"Guess she's not used to being in ninth grade yet," I said.

Stacy was talking but I didn't really listen to her. It was hard to remember if we'd been getting along the last time I'd seen her. She asked a question.

Nim answered her: "We got Mr. Green."

"Who's he?"

"My brother had Mr. Green," Schultz said.

"I think Rhiannon did too."

"Yeah, he said Green was a real, uh, jerk. Always pullin' pop quizzes out of his butt. You're lucky, Duncan. You get Mrs. Klein."

"I want to be in there with you guys," I said.

"Sam said Mr. Green made a girl cry once," said Schultz. "He used to make everybody keep track of their total points and read them out loud to make sure they checked out with his figures. Girl didn't want to tell everybody what kinda grade she had so he told her she'd fail if she didn't. Made her cry."

"Hey, here comes Doug," said Nim.

Doug was walking pretty slow. He made it to the doors, where we were all standing. He was breathing hard, shallow breaths.

"What's wrong, Doug?"

"I... hhhad.... tttto..."

"Dude, wind down a little," said Schultz.

"Ugh. Um. Okay. I had to... ugh... I had to walk all the way into town from Gramps's house."

"That bites the big chowder," Schultz said. And he was right. Gramps Fry lived a couple miles outside of town.

"I stayed out there last night and, um, his truck needs a part or something. And my mom and dad work real early."

Stacy said, "My dad works early too. He works for the newspaper."

"Yeah, we know," I said.

"Sorry," she said with a scowl on her face, "just trying to talk a little bit."

A frowning woman in a flowery dress opened the doors from inside. Everybody lined up to go in.

"Oh crap," said Doug. "I forgot to eat breakfast!"

"Okay, gnaw on your hand or something till lunch."

"Shut up, Matt."

Stacy handed Doug a box of animal crackers. He looked embarrassed.

I couldn't believe my luck: Stephanie Carmichael was in Mrs. Klein's class.

Stephanie sat at a desk near the front of the classroom, doodling on a piece of looseleaf paper. She erased part of her drawing, flipped her hair back out of her eyes.

She'd never said a word to me before. But maybe that would change. Maybe my seat would be near hers, and I could find a way to strike up conversation and impress her until she agreed to be mine.

Just then Taylor Ellis sat down in the seat next to her. I noticed that everyone's names were written in black marker on index cards propped up on the desks. The names were in alphabetical order, which meant I'd be just past the middle, closer to the back than to the front.

Palmer. Peterson. Prather. Quinn. No Pierce.

I stood next to the empty coat rack for a couple minutes, waiting for the teacher to come in so we could get this sorted out and I'd have a place to sit. Stephanie glanced up at me once, then looked back to her drawing before I had the chance to smile at her.

I felt conspicuous, as though we were all playing Musical Chairs and I was the loser.

Just as I was about to leave the room screaming out of ten-year-old fury and anguish, an old woman limped into the room. She walked past me, to the front, and turned to smile at everyone.

"Hello there, children," she said. "I am..." She wrote a name on the chalkboard. "...Mrs. Klein. I've been looking forward to teaching you. I think it's going to be a good year."

I tried, and failed, to hide behind the coat rack. Mrs. Klein was the only person in the room besides Stephanie who didn't seem to notice me standing there. She took roll

call, which seemed to take about twenty years, then finally said, "Anyone whose name I did not call?"

Slowly I raised my hand, wishing I'd played sick so I could stay home to play with Benny.

"What is your name?"

"Duncan Pierce," I said tentatively, ready to take it back if this woman decided it was the wrong answer to her question.

"Duncan Pierce, your name does sound familiar..." Her voice trailed off as she searched her desk. She picked up a green sheet of paper, read from it. "Oh... oh, yes. Here you are."

"What'd I do?" I asked, and my voice came out much higher than I wanted it to be.

"You were reassigned. A few of the students were moved around at the last minute."

"How come?"

She ignored my question. "Go three doors down and across the hall. Room 29A. You're in Mr. Green's classroom." She leaned back against her desk, shifting weight off her right leg.

I actually smiled as I headed out the door. That meant I could be with my friends. My one regret was that I couldn't take Stephanie Carmichael with me.

I stood outside the door of the other fifth-grade classroom. A deep, articulate voice spoke from the other side. I couldn't make out all the words. Suddenly I realized I didn't want to be in there after all, even if my friends were in there. There was something about that voice...

I could make a run for it, one foot in front of the other, jogging running sprinting, legs going swish-swish back and forth; I could get away and nobody would know what happened to me.

Even the door was intimidating somehow. The voice behind it sounded like its owner was already berating his students for something. What would he say about students who were tardy?

I wondered how far I could get on foot before it got dark.

Join the circus! That's what I could do. Feed the elephants. Help put up tents. Put on silly make-up and silly red shoes and be a clown. I wouldn't get to watch Marx Brothers movies with Grandpa Ted anymore but at least I wouldn't have to take any pop quizzes. I'd never be able to listen to the blues again with Rhiannon but at least I wouldn't have to announce my grades to the whole class.

Mrs. Klein stepped into the hallway, saw me. "That's right, Duncan," she said. "That's the room you want."

I could have run away, just barreled right past her, knocking her to the ground and heading for the nearest carnival, but I imagined a squad of security guards emerging from nowhere and blocking my escape. And even if I did manage to get away, Benny would never have forgiven me if I'd run away, never to return to play with him.

I opened the classroom door.

"Congratulations," said a gray-haired man in a navy blue suit, "you are the last student to arrive, which earns you the dubious privilege of wearing the sacred dunce cap for today. What is your name?"

My instinct had been correct. I should have run.

"D-Duncan Pierce," I said for the second time in as many minutes.

Mr. Green handed me a bright pink pointy hat with DUNCE scrawled on it in huge black letters.

"But I was on the wrong list," I said, "and..."

"I'm not interested in entertaining your excuses, Mr. Pierce. I am simply interested in seeing what this item looks like perched upon your head. Go on, put it on, your peers are eager for a laugh."

I spotted Nim in the front row, Schultz sitting behind her--apparently there were no alphabetically assigned seats in Mr. Green's class--and they both were grinning playfully at me. Doug sat two rows over, looking relieved. He told me later that he'd been the last person before I showed up.

Nim snickered. She whispered, "Is Dunc short for Duncan?"

I *really* hated the first day of school.

Mr. Green was now standing, arms folded, between me and the door. It was as if he sensed how badly I wanted to make a break for it.

No way out. I put on the cap.

Some laughter, mostly more snickering. Nim shook her head and gave me a toothy little smile.

"You're lucky, Mr. Pierce," said Mr. Green. "It's only a half-day today."

The dunce cap flopped around on my head as I sat at the empty desk behind Schultz.

He whispered, "Smooth move, Ex-Lax. Hey, I thought you were in the other class."

"Me too," I whispered back. "They moved me but they took forever to tell me."

"Good," he muttered. "Mr. Green's hilarious, boss. Sam was right though, he's kinda mean..."

Mr. Green stopped his lecture in mid-sentence. "I don't recall asking for a running commentary, Mr. Schultz."

"Oh," Schultz said. "Sorry, man."

Two girls in the back giggled. One of them was Stacy Jones.

Mr. Green blinked. "Apologies are inexpensive. Now, I do intend for us as a class to have fun learning once in a while, but I do like to give out the occasional pop quiz to keep you all on track..."

Doug flinched.

I tried to listen to Mr. Green but I still felt embarrassed and my head kept itching under the cap.

At 11:20 the bell rang, and the first day of fifth grade was over forever. Schultz and Nim waited for me in the hall while I returned the stupid dunce cap to Mr. Green. I dropped it on his desk where he was sitting and started to walk away.

"You're not in my class to be the dunce, Mr. Pierce," he said without looking up from his book. "Do you know that?"

"Yes. Yes." I still don't know why I said it twice.

He glanced upward at me, stared me in the eyes. "Perhaps you missed the implications of that remark. I understand you have an affinity for creating works of fiction. I'd say that sort of drive could be used for learning more about reality as well."

"Yeah, okay," I said lightly, trying to pass it off. But I didn't know what to say.

I turned to leave again. This time he cleared his throat. I stopped. From his desk he pulled a short stack of lined notebook paper, stapled down the left side.

I recognized the handwriting on the front. It was my first *Time Kids* story, the one that came in second in the Young Authors contest.

"You seem to have a keen grasp on world history, for example."

I nodded and this time he let me go.

"What was that about?" Nim asked me once I'd closed the door.

"I think he just called me smart," I said.

"Oh."

We walked down the hallway and started to leave the school grounds outside but then Nim saw her mother's car. Miss Rainer called to all of us to get in.

Benny was with her, in the front passenger seat. "Hi, Dunca, Show, Nimmy!"

"What's going on?" I asked. We crowded into the back seat, Nim in the middle.

Miss Rainer grinned at me. "Absolutely nothing, Duncan," she said with a wink.

She pulled around the building, stopped the car in the opposite parking lot. The high school bus pulled up to the curb a couple minutes later. We picked up Rhiannon, who looked like she'd rather just walk home by herself. She got into the front passenger seat and put Benny on her lap. Schultz watched her.

Benny tried to look over the seat at us but Rhiannon held him back. "Easy, tiger," she said.

He played with a button on Rhiannon's shirt. "Wally home," he said.

"What?"

He wouldn't say it again. Rhiannon looked back at me; I shrugged.

The car stopped in our driveway. I was surprised Miss Rainer didn't drop Schultz off first. Meredith was sitting on the porch reading a romance novel. I wasn't used to seeing her outside these days. We all piled out of Miss Rainer's car. Someone was shoving a push mower back and forth across the back yard. The someone looked up, let go of the handle to stop the mower's roar, and walked over to us. He was taller than Bill, and didn't have a beer belly. What he did have was dark curly hair and black-rimmed glasses. He wore a sweaty white T-shirt and red jogging shorts. With his goofy grin and larger-than-average ears and slightly awkward walk, he looked to me at first like a true dunce, albeit a very happy one. Meredith leaned over and gave him a quick kiss.

Benny ran up to this strange man and punched him gently on the leg, right below the knee. The man laughed. Benny stood next to him. "It's surprise!" he said.

Nim and Schultz sat down on the porch behind Meredith. They watched me to see how I was going to react.

I had a lot of questions. But for the moment I only asked one:

“What’s your name?”

“Wally,” the strange man said.

Rhiannon glared at Meredith.

“Hi, Wally,” I said.

The Christmas Program

Meredith was *laughing*.

I hadn't seen her laugh in years. I hadn't seen her cry in a long time either. She'd become almost emotionless in my eyes. But Wally Garland could make her laugh to the point that she held her sides and said she was going to throw up if he kept saying funny things.

There was just something about him--maybe his goofy face, maybe his off-the-wall comments, maybe a combination of those qualities and more--that made everything that was serious and painful just dissolve away.

"Yep! Duncan and Benny and me. We'll go to the park and chase all the girls. They won't see us coming. Which is probably a good thing, 'cause otherwise we'd never catch any. I'll put on that Garland charm--"

With that his right eyebrow curved upward like Mr. Spock's used to do on "Star Trek." My laughter came out high-pitched, the giggle that only came out of me when I was highly amused. Wally had been going strong for twenty minutes, and I hoped he'd never stop. In three months of knowing him he'd never bored me once.

Benny climbed up in his lap and started trying to wiggle Wally's ears with his little hands. Grandma Ruth walked in at that moment and said, "Get the boy away from that guy's giant ears! Giant ears, he's got giant ears!"

Rhiannon snorted, then turned back to her algebra homework. She didn't really enjoy Wally's comedy like the rest of us did. In fact she didn't seem to like him at all.

"The Garland charm's in my ears," said Wally. "That's the only place it'll fit. I could give you half my charm, but I'd have to pull a Van Gogh first."

Grandma Ruth shook her head and started tracing an imaginary line across the room with her index finger, pointing directly in front of her nose. She did this often when someone said something that confused her.

"Do you think I have Pierce charm?" I asked.

"You? Absolutely! You have enough Pierce charm to pierce my ears and *steal* all my charm!"

I giggled again.

"Rehearsals will begin next Monday," said Mr. Green. He cleared his throat to wake up Schultz. "Mr. Schultz will be my assistant director. The assistant director has a very important job. He does everything the director doesn't want to do."

Schultz sighed. "Like I have a choice."

"The world loves a realist, Mr. Schultz. Now, there are several parts to give out, so anyone with acting aspirations..."

Nim raised her hand.

"Yes. Miss Rainer."

"I'll play any part you want me to play," she said. "Even if it's just a tree." I noticed her hands were shaking slightly in her lap.

Mr. Green nodded. "It's refreshing to see such enthusiasm for the theatre. You'll be glad to know that almost all of our roles are human ones."

Schultz leaned back in his chair. I stared at my ink pen.

Mr. Green continued. "The program revolves around Santa Claus, but he only appears in two short scenes. We'll be needing someone who doesn't mind portraying an essentially non-speaking character."

I looked up.

Stephanie Carmichael was in my P.E. class. She wore green shorts and a light gray Bentleyville Tigers T-shirt. The last time she'd talked to me was about two weeks earlier. We'd been playing dodgeball. Somebody on the other team hit her in the face with the ball. The kid who threw the ball had to sit down, even though he told Mrs. Bowman it was an accident. The words I chose to comfort Stephanie were, "Maybe that didn't hurt too much," and I realized how stupid they sounded even as they came out of my mouth. Stephanie had rubbed the side of her face, which was already turning red from the impact of the ball, and said, "I'll live."

Now I decided I was going to try talking to her again. I was pretty sure I knew what I'd done wrong the last time: I was too nervous and I took too much time thinking about it first. Logically if I just talked and didn't worry about what I said I'd be okay.

It was open gym day. Stephanie was shooting baskets with her friends. She'd made two of the last five shots she'd thrown. I counted.

I walked up behind her just after she threw. The basketball bounced off the rim. I tapped her on the shoulder. She turned, and I said the first thing that popped into my head:

"My Dad's a dick, and I'm glad he doesn't live with us anymore."

Her eyebrows creased. Her friends stared.

"Yeah, that's great," she said.

She ran to retrieve the ball.

Time to work out Plan C.

My voice quivered: "I don't think I can do this." I said it too loud; the lady teacher sitting by Mr. Green shushed me.

"You'll be fine," Nim said.

"Dude, don't worry about it." Schultz slouched back in his seat. "It's just a stupid play anyway. Don't mean nothin'."

"Shut your cheese stick of a head," Nim said.

Mr. Green called on another student to try out. A skinny frizzy-haired girl walked up to the stage.

"Cheese stick?" Schultz said. "Want some wine with that?"

The lady teacher shushed Schultz.

Frizzy Hair read a short scene. She stuttered a little but got through okay.

"Thank you, Miss Hardison," said Mr. Green. "Duncan Pierce?"

The auditorium shifted ten degrees to the left; didn't anyone else in the room sense it? I couldn't move. If I started walking I'd surely puke all over the floor, all over my T-shirt. Nim nudged my leg. I stood up but I didn't feel entirely in control of my own body. I was on strings, walking up onto the stage, clutching the handrail, knuckle-white. I stood on center stage. Stephanie Carmichael was directly in front of me, reading a book with horses on the cover. My stomach lurched; I'd puke for sure if she looked up. I opened my mouth to read the lines on the page on the table next to me, and miraculously I didn't puke. Silently I thanked the God that I barely thought about outside of church. Out with the first line, still not puking, couple more lines. I was reading Father Time's part but everyone knew I'd never be able to carry a large role because every time I had to speak in front of class I stammered and stuttered and my hands shook and my eyes darted around the room. Father Time had too many lines, making me nervous, voice cracking, still not puking though, thank that God guy in the sky, and I kept talking but I stopped thinking about anything else and for some reason my imagination was transfixed with images of Benny wiggling Wally Garland's big ears around with his miniature fingers. Benny didn't laugh at Wally's funny faces or his silly yet clever jokes but he was determined to try and pull those ears right out of his head just as much as I was determined to get through this scene so I could go sit down. I read the lines to the

audience, sentence by sentence and word by word, and nobody threw anything and I didn't puke and I made it to the end, and Mr. Green said, "Thank you, Mr. Pierce" and called Nim to the stage, and my heart beat a loud, steady rhythm within my chest as I walked past Nim who was going up onstage, and I'd made it through and now I could sit down next to Schultz, who gave me the thumbs-up. I breathed relief.

Stephanie never looked at me once.

Nim was trying out to be the Easter Bunny. That was the second-biggest role after Father Time. She said her lines carefully, looking at the page a few times but mostly directing them to us. She looked like she was in the midst of the scene on another planet or something, totally into it but with no idea what was going on around her. Schultz had been rustling pages around but now he stopped and stared at her. Even Stephanie Carmichael turned away from her horse book to watch. Nim didn't shake and she didn't hide behind anything. She finished the monologue and came back to sit down on the other side of me. Mr. Green called Tim Connors to the stage.

"That was really good, Nim!" said Schultz.

"Yeah," I said.

From three rows behind us the frizzy-haired girl loudly whispered, "Nim, you tore us all up, girl!"

Several people laughed, Schultz and me included.

Nim swallowed. Her eyes looked a little watery.

"It wasn't very good," she said. "I can do a *lot* better."

"I made the play," I told my family.

"Cool," said Rhiannon. She went back to eating spaghetti. Her face was nearly as messy with spaghetti sauce as Benny's was.

Meredith said nothing at all. Sometimes I felt she didn't know what to say to me. It shouldn't have been that hard to ask what the play was about or who was in it.

Only Wally seemed authentically impressed. "What character do you get to be?"

I told him.

"It's not that big of a part really," I said.

"But you can have fun with a role like Santa Claus, I mean, jeez." Wally set his fork down on the plate in front of him, wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I think that's how Art Carney started."

"No," Meredith said. "He was older when he played Santa Claus on 'The Twilight Zone.'"

"It'll be a stretch since you're not very heavy. But you can pull it off."

"Or else his beard'll *fall* off," said my sister.

I looped some random spaghetti strands onto my fork. "Nim got in too. She was real good at her tryout. But she didn't get the Easter Bunny like she wanted. She got Mrs. Claus."

"You're married to her?" Rhiannon said with a smirk.

"Just in the play. She likes to act and she's real good."

"What about you, Duncan?" Wally said. "Do you want to act?"

Meredith said, "He freezes up when he has to talk in front of people. That might be a problem, Duncan."

"Mr. Green wants me to do it," I said. "But it bites the big chowder."

Wally laughed. "I know, you'd rather write the plays and let other people act 'em out. I bet you'll be a great writer. Is he a great writer, Meredith?"

Meredith glanced from the window behind Rhiannon's head to the can of parmesan cheese to Wally's chin. Her eyes continued to glide, stopping finally on the front cover of the red notebook in front of me, the one with my robot stories in it.

"I don't know," she said quietly.

Read-through was fun. We sat in a big circle in Mr. Green's classroom, about fourteen or fifteen of us, and he told us about each scene so we knew what he wanted from us. Schultz passed the time by making paper airplanes until Mr. Green told him he'd fail our class if he made any more.

A tall, fat sixth-grader named George Underwood was playing Father Time. George tried a British accent.

"Play it as yourself," said Mr. Green.

"But I don't *like* myself!" said George, and everyone except Mr. Green laughed.

"Use your own voice, Mr. Underwood. I know you have one."

"How do you *really* know I have a voice?"

"The constant evidence of my ears every afternoon is a dead giveaway, Mr. Underwood. Read the scene, please."

George persisted. "How do you know I'm real? How do you know *any* of us are really here?"

"Unfortunately, we have little time for philosophical debate. However, I applaud your free-spirited thinking. Continue."

George rushed his first two lines.

"Slow down. Let it happen. Wait for it."

"Hey, I'm Father Time," said George. "I control how fast or slow everything goes."

"I'll give the role to someone else if you wish to be frivolous about it."

George said his part. Once he got down to business he wasn't bad.

Stephanie Carmichael was the Easter Bunny. She got mad at Mr. Green because he'd decided to cut out one of the songs she was supposed to sing. "We just don't have time for everything," he said.

"But I wanted to sing," Stephanie said. Nim rolled her eyes.

I liked read-through. I didn't have to do much because I only had three lines. But I was late reading one of them because I was laughing at something Schultz whispered to me. I tried to repeat what he'd said to Nim a few moments later, but she didn't even look away from the script.

Rhiannon stepped on me by mistake.

Schultz was staying over on a Friday night, about a week before the Christmas program. He fell asleep on the couch watching *Beverly Hills Cop*. I was on the floor, and I kept drifting off. Sometime during the night I could hear Meredith rustling around, turning the lights on and off on the other side of the house. Finally she stepped into the living room, paused, then turned off the lamps before walking back to her bedroom. A little later the front door opened and my sister stepped inside. In the dark she didn't see me sprawled out on the floor.

"Yahhhh!" I said when I felt her shoe press down on my right arm.

"Oh my fuck!" she whispered, loudly. "Sorry, Duncan..." She bent down, sat next to me on the floor.

I hadn't really talked to her in quite a while. She was suddenly busy with homework and chorus and her boyfriend Bruce, the guy with the huge head I'd seen her talking to the first day of school. "What are you doing?" I asked, squinting at her.

"I will *not* be cooped up with you and Benny every night," she said, playing absently with her brown leather-jacket sleeve. "I'm fourteen years old." The corners of her mouth tightened to accentuate what she was saying.

"Where were you?"

"Bruce's."

"Meredith said you can't see him."

"I don't care."

I heard movement from the couch. "What's going on... ugh..."

"Hey Schultz," Rhiannon said.

"Hey. How's it goin', Reeny?"

He called her Reeny sometimes to try to get to her. For some reason he and Benny were the only ones who could still call her that.

"It blows, man," Rhiannon sighed. "Bruce wants more than I want."

"Is he giving you a bunch of hell about it?"

"Yeah."

"Cut him loose," Schultz said. "Life's too short to take that."

"He called me a skank."

"Did you deck him?"

"I cussed him out," said Rhiannon with a wry grin. "Then he apologized."

"Find somebody that treats ya like a queen. Don't waste your time with hosers."

"Yeah, right, like there's all kindsa guys like that in Bentleyville."

"That's just what I think..."

I fell asleep.

We'd been play-practicing after school two days a week. Mr. Green told me to try to get more excited about being Santa Claus. I didn't understand why he didn't just cast George Underwood for it. George would've been better, and he was fat enough he wouldn't need to be stuffed with pillows. Of course that would leave the role of Father Time open, but surely they'd find somebody else and that way I wouldn't have to be on stage.

Stephanie was a perky and energetic Easter Bunny. She liked to take her shoes off during practice so it would be easier for her to run around onstage. One day Nim backed up during a scene and stepped on Stephanie's left foot; at the time I thought it was an accident but now I don't think so. Stephanie got so mad she began to cry.

"God, chill out," Nim said. "It's not like you won't be able to play your precious part."

I asked Stephanie if she was okay. She nodded, wiping tears from her pretty brown eyes. Nim gave me a mean look.

Schultz had to sit by Mr. Green during practices, away from the rest of us in the auditorium. I didn't think Schultz liked Mr. Green very much. I usually sat by Nim and George. George said a lot of funny things to make us laugh. Sometimes he imitated Mr. Green's walk: slow, direct, occasional light hop. He tried to do Mr. Green's voice too, but it didn't sound right.

Rhiannon and Meredith had a huge argument the night before the Christmas program.

Meredith found a crumpled letter on the nightstand by Rhiannon's bed. She read it and got very angry. Then Rhiannon came home from school and Meredith showed her the letter. Then *both* of them were angry. They yelled at each other for a very long time. Just when emotions were getting uncontrollable, Wally Garland showed up and they calmed down briefly. They kept saying mean things to each other though, so Wally took Benny and me out for ice cream just so we wouldn't have to hear it.

"They were both swearing a lot," I said. Wally wiped vanilla off Benny's face. We were at the Polar Bear, the brand-new ice-cream parlor next to Ziggy's Pizza.

"I know it," Wally said. "We'll just let 'em be dumb. We're having too much fun to spoil it listening to them. Right, Benny?"

"Dumb," said Benny. He giggled. "Wally fun."

"Thank you, Benny," said Wally. "I taught him to say that."

"Wally fun'?" I repeated. I had to agree though; he had a way of making things fun that were formerly all but intolerable.

"How's the program going?"

I took another taste of my root-beer float. "It's okay. I want it over though."

"Gotcha. Just be sure to introduce us to all your girlfriends afterwards."

I smiled. Benny smeared ice cream on his left hand.

The big day had arrived. The worst part was that I had to wait through the whole program for my scene because I didn't even appear until the end.

Everyone was ready to go but Rhiannon. She was still in her bedroom. She said she wanted to look her best because Bruce would be there. Of course she didn't say that to Meredith. Schultz had offered to happily beat the piss out of Bruce if she wanted him to. She'd told Schultz to be good.

I paced. I wished Wally could just give Schultz and me a ride and then come back for Meredith and Rhiannon. I paced. Schultz read a *Sports Illustrated* in the kitchen. I paced. Meredith moved her figurines around on the shelves. Benny followed me back and forth through the kitchen and the living room as I paced.

"Stop moving around, Duncan," Meredith said.

I stopped. Benny stopped too.

"Meredith!" Rhiannon hollered from her bedroom down the hall. "My earrings! Where are my earrings?"

"Duncan, take these in to your sister." She handed me the earrings.

My feet dragged on the carpet. Benny followed me.

I walked up to Rhiannon's door, turned the knob. She was standing in front of her mirror in just her bra and a red skirt. She saw it was me, covered herself quickly with a thin sheet, and yelled at me to get out. I started to walk back to the kitchen, Benny following me.

Wally stepped out of the bathroom across the hall. "Hey, what's the noise about, you guys?" He started into Rhiannon's room before I could stop him.

She yelled again: "You're all perverts! All of you!"

Wally called over his shoulder, retreating: "I didn't know you were--the, the door was open, Rhiannon!"

"Duncan! You didn't shut the door!!"

"Sorry," I said, now safely in the kitchen.

"Sorry?" she yelled from her room. "What do you mean, sorry? Because of you I've been flashing everyone! Hey Schultz! *Schultz!* Come in here so you can look at my *boobs!*"

"Okay, well, one small step for man..." said Schultz with a smirk, getting up from the kitchen table.

He sat back down when we heard her bedroom door slam.

Chaos reigned.

George was sick. He said he'd puked in his dad's car on the way to the auditorium. But he insisted he'd be fine to go on with the show. While Mr. Green reeled from that piece of news, Nim rushed in apologizing to everyone because she was five minutes late and she was afraid it would screw up her chances in future plays. Mr. Green assured her she was not that tardy; if it had been me he'd probably have made me wear the dunce cap. Stephanie couldn't find her Easter basket anywhere. She had about six fifth-graders looking for it. They all gave up about a minute into the search, and she asked me to carry on looking in their place. While I was poking around backstage trying to find the wayward basket, some crabby, heavysset sixth-grade girl with really thick glasses yelled at me because I wasn't in the locker room getting my pillows tucked in to be Santa Claus (as if it was going to take more than about thirty seconds or so). I told her I was trying to find the Easter basket. She said the prop kid could handle that, she didn't have time to worry about dumb things like Easter baskets and she was mortified that I wasn't even in costume yet! I rushed into the boys' locker room, located the locker where I'd stashed my costume, and threw it on over my regular clothes. I stepped out of the locker room to

see Thick Glasses scowling at me. She grabbed the pillows, thrust them into my red and white Santa coat, shoved my white wig onto my head and my fake beard onto my chin, muttered, "You look great, kid," with a fixed smile on her chubby face, and wandered off to help someone else get ready. Stephanie found the Easter basket but three of the eggs were broken. Schultz walked up to us and suggested we check the cafeteria to see if they had some eggs to replace the broken ones. "Not funny," said Stephanie, and Schultz said he wasn't trying to be funny, just trying to help. She ran and asked Mr. Green what she should do. Mr. Green said it was okay because she still had nine eggs in her basket and nobody would ever notice. Things calmed down for a while. We sat around backstage while parents and grandparents and brothers and sisters and cousins filed into the auditorium. I tried to tell Stephanie she looked pretty but as I was walking up behind her to tell her, my Santa coat fell open and one of the pillows fell out. She walked on, not seeing me. Schultz sat down backstage in his chair next to the closed curtain, script in hand so he could prompt anyone who missed a line. The auditorium lights dimmed, and the band started in on the first song. Clarinets, flutes, drums. As the light went up onstage, George puked on the floor behind the curtain. "Sick!" Schultz whispered. George made a face that showed he agreed, wiped his mouth on a brown cotton/polyester sleeve, and walked out onstage to sing the first song. I had a long time to wait for my scene, so I pulled up a chair next to Schultz (carefully avoiding the puke) and began to wait.

The first act went great. Nobody except Schultz and me had any idea that George coughed up his car keys immediately before his scene. Stephanie only messed up one line, and her delivery was so fast that nobody really noticed. Schultz kept peeking at the audience through a small hole in the curtain. He whispered that he could see Rhiannon sitting next to Bruce in the second row. I peeked. Bruce had his arm around her back, his fingers extending around and just touching her left breast. Schultz looked again, this time seeing where Bruce's hand was.

"Son of a bitch," he said. "I'm gonna fuckin' kill him." Luckily Stephanie was doing her song, the one Mr. Green didn't cut, so nobody heard Schultz. Nim walked up to us, taking extra care to walk quietly on the boards. I pointed to George's puke so she wouldn't step in it. She frowned, and for a second I thought she was going to be sick too. She pulled up a chair on the other side of me.

"Schultz's gonna kill Bruce," I whispered in Nim's ear.

She shushed me and then closed her eyes, listening intently to the end of Stephanie's song. Stephanie hit a note too high and I watched Nim to see if she'd point it out, but Nim's expression didn't change.

The act was over. It was time for intermission. I told Mr. Green (away from George) about the puke. He ran to find a janitor. I turned back to talk to Schultz but he was gone. Stephanie handed me her Easter basket. "Guard this with your life, Darren," she said. Darren wasn't my name but my tongue froze and my mouth went dry and all I could do was nod. Nim stared at the script, soundlessly going over her lines in the second act. She was supposed to come in as Mrs. Claus, all teary-eyed because Santa was missing. Mrs. Claus had to cry and give a speech about how nice and kind Santa had always been not only to the children but also to the little elves and the reindeer.

"I want to cry real tears," Nim said suddenly.

"Okay," I said. "What does that mean?"

She took a deep breath. "Duncan, I want you to make me cry."

"How do I do that?"

She thought about it. "Hmm. Oh, I know. Just before I go out there, pull on my hair really hard. I mean *really* hard. That'll make me cry."

"I don't know if I can do that," I said. "Maybe you should get Schultz. He'd do it."

"I don't want Schultz to do it. I want you to."

The janitor showed up. He was a shaky old man with a weird smell. He looked at Nim and me for a moment, as if accusing us of throwing up on his nice clean floor. Then he mopped it up, shaking his head and making strange tick-tick noises with his tongue. Nim was sitting with her eyes closed again. I wished Schultz was here so we could whisper jokes about the janitor together.

"Places, people," Mr. Green said softly, marking off something on his clipboard. "The program's going well. If we keep up this momentum I'll be very pleased."

The janitor wandered away, scooting his bucket along with the mop. The lights began to dim again.

Schultz was nowhere to be seen.

The second that Mr. Green walked away, I squinted through the hole in the curtain.

Schultz was sitting directly behind Bruce and Rhiannon. It looked like he was writing, but I couldn't tell because Bruce's gargantuan head was in the way. I could only hope nobody forgot their lines, since he wasn't backstage to prompt them.

Onstage, George and Tim Connors and Marcy Kramer played out the start of the second act, a little too loudly in the case of Marcy. Nim removed her gray wig, her long brown hair spilling out, and looked at me. "I'm on in half a page."

I knew what that meant.

Make me cry.

I reached out and grabbed a few strands of her hair. I pulled.

She shook her head. "Okay, yeah, that hurts a little," she muttered, "but not enough to really make me cry."

"Okay..."

"Duncan, you gotta *really* yank, hard, with both hands. Make me cry. Make me cry. Can you do it? 'Cause if you can't I'll have to try to do it myself."

She stared at me. Suddenly I wanted to hide, but there was nowhere to go. Nim's intensity could be pretty scary sometimes.

"Stop being a stupid shithead and do it."

"I don't want to," I said.

"Duncan, did you hear what I--"

And then both of my hands were locked in her hair, right in the back where it was longest; they were tugging, pulling, seizing downward. A gasp escaped Nim's lips and she put a hand to her eyes. She stared at me again, but without anger this time. A teardrop coasted down the side of her face and hit my elbow. I let go.

Her cue line came up and she nearly missed her entrance because she was scrambling to get all her hair back into the Mrs. Claus wig and the wig back onto her head. She walked out onstage. I could hear the tears in her voice: she was really crying, Nim was *crying*. I'd made her cry. I looked down at my hands. Several strands of medium-brown hair were between my fingers, no longer attached to her head.

There was some muttering from the audience beyond the curtain. "Oh my God..." someone said aloud. It might have been Rhiannon, but I couldn't tell for sure.

Nim said her lines about missing Santa Claus and being worried that he might have been kidnapped. I glanced through the hole again, just in time to see Schultz hand Rhiannon a piece of paper. I kept watching. Rhiannon looked at the paper for maybe twenty seconds, crumpled it up, and threw it on the floor in front of her as Schultz watched from behind her. Bruce smirked, bent over, picked up the paper, and uncrumpled it to read. After a few moments he reached back to grab or hit or punch Schultz, but his elbow inadvertently hit Rhiannon just below the chin. She jumped up and scooted past the people to her left and headed up the aisle and out the double doors in back of the auditorium. The doors made a *ka-chunk* sound as they closed. Bruce followed, throwing open the doors again and stomping through--*ka-chunk*! A few seconds later, from a spot toward the back of the auditorium, somewhere in the center, a man stood and headed out

the double doors--*ka-chunk*. And I heard someone approach me from behind, and I turned to see Mr. Green with his arms folded over his chest. "You're on, Mr. Pierce," he said quietly but forcefully. Time seemed to stop, and the entire world was silent, waiting for me to make my way through the curtain and into the fictional universe of the Christmas program. I heard Nim make up a line--"I don't think it's him; he'd be *here* by now if it was!"--and I prayed to God that my wig and hat and beard and pillows were in place because I was afraid to check, and I stepped out onstage.

"I'm sorry I was held up," I said, realizing at the same time that the lights were *extremely* bright and hot and I couldn't see a thing past the edge of the stage, not even the pit band directly in front of me. A lot of people laughed, including George and Marcy. Nim grinned at me, her eyes a sparkling green in the blinding lights. Time crawled. I said another of my lines, looking down at the floor, then back at Nim. She reached out, grabbed my right hand in her left. A fresh drop welled up in her left eye. I wanted to give her a hug and tell her I didn't mean to pull her hair that hard but I couldn't move.

George stepped up to me, handing me a huge bowl of cookies. "We're excited to see ya, Santa," he said. "What kept you?"

That wasn't his real line, and I could tell he was putting me on the spot on purpose. I said the first thing that came to mind: "People fighting and pulling each other's hair."

Nim squeezed my hand.

This is the note Schultz wrote to Rhiannon:

Reeny -

Look I love you. I know youre older then me but I'm better then that Brucehole. He's mean to you and I don't like that. just think about that.

Schultz had Wally to thank for following them to the hallway. Wally said later that all he did was stand behind Rhiannon; that was all it took to get Bruce to leave her and Schultz alone. In fact Bruce stopped talking to Rhiannon altogether, which made her furious at both Wally and Schultz for a while. Wally said to Schultz and me, "She'll get over it. I just wish that would've worked when I tried it on the Neanderthals I went to school with. The hair on their backs alone was thick enough to build a bridge out of." We laughed.

And Mr. Green was a little mad because I was late for my big scene, but he said I could still keep the beard and the hat.

Benny and Rhiannon

Benny ran after the squirrel. He tried to touch it but it sprinted away. Nim and I trailed behind. I looked back at Rhiannon. She was watching Benny and writing in her notebook. By the rules of her assignment she wasn't allowed to run after him, or interact with him in any way. That's why Nim and I were there.

Eventually Benny got bored with the squirrel chase, and sat down in the snow. I had to laugh because he looked funny, all bundled up like the little brother in *A Christmas Story*. It was the second Saturday in January, and the air in the park had a heavy chill to it. Benny ran his right hand back and forth across the left sleeve of his bright blue snowsuit. Nim picked up a tiny Matchbox pickup truck that had been left under a tree by some other kid. She put it down on the cold ground next to Benny's feet. He looked at the Matchbox, then at her. He grabbed the truck in his tiny two-year-old hands and ran it up Nim's shoe and halfway up to her knee, then dropped it and made a crashing noise with his mouth as the truck hit the ground.

Rhiannon sat on the bench behind us, unmindful of the snow piled on top of it, the snow that was making her jeans wet. She wrote more in her notebook, her mouth just almost touching the eraser end of her pencil as she tried to think of the right words. She smiled and wrote. I knew that feeling.

"Where Show?" Benny asked me.

"Um, Schultz is home with his mom and dad. He'll come over sometime soon."

Rhiannon displayed no sign that she heard us; she was still mad at Schultz. That whole day she was quiet, pensive. I thought it might be because she was trying to get a

good grade on her paper. Her teacher wanted her to follow the person of her choice around for a day and observe them from a distance, in as objective a manner as possible. I hoped she'd get an A.

Benny held up his Matchbox truck to Rhiannon. She turned away because she couldn't interact with him. He threw the truck at her feet and missed. He started to cry but Nim picked him up and carried him back to the tree and he was okay again.

I pulled my gloves tighter on my hands. I picked up a handful of snow and packed it into a ball. Benny watched, fascinated. He struggled in Nim's arms and she set him down next to me in the snow. I put a smaller handful of snow on his snowsuit leg. He stared at it for a moment, then slowly grabbed it up. Without looking at it, he made a snowball and then took a glove off and pressed his little index finger into it a few times. He handed me the snowball and stood, the glove falling to the ground. Then he ran a few feet away from us and stopped. "Squirrel," he said, pointing. We all looked, but we couldn't see it.

I threw the snowball as far as I could in the opposite direction.

"Reeny look at squirrel," he said.

Rhiannon wrote, not making eye contact.

"Reeny, want Reeny."

Nim and I both reached for Benny but he jumped up and ran to Rhiannon's bench, stopping a few feet away. He stood there for a few seconds, looking at the street that ran past the park, behind her. Then he walked over to the drinking fountain about five yards from the bench. He picked up a small stick and started hitting the drinking fountain with it.

Rhiannon made a quick note in her notebook. She got up from the bench. Dropped the notebook and pencil. Walked over to Benny, picked him up, held him. He gently tapped her shoulder with the stick.

"You're cheating," I said. "You're just supposed to watch him and write down what he does."

"I don't care," she said, holding our little brother.

Anniversary

They'd been gone for almost two years; then, the night before the last day of school, they called the house. Grandma Ruth and I were the only ones home, so I answered:

"Hello?"

"Yeah. Duncan?" said a deep voice.

"Hi. Who is this?"

"It's Ricky."

"Oh. Um. Hi, Ricky."

"Bill's here too."

"This is kinda weird," I said.

"Yeah. For us too, it is. Grandma Lucy said we better call."

"Oh. She's been feeling better lately." I didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah. Duncan, is that guy Meredith's seeing gonna be at Grandma and Grandpa's anniversary party?"

"How do you know about the anniversary party?" I blurted out.

"We got invited. I'm taking my girlfriend. Her name's Denise and she's hot."

"You got a girlfriend?"

"Who got a girlfriend?" Grandma Ruth stepped into the room, carrying an orange popsicle that was already starting to melt.

"Ricky."

"Rowdy Howdy? Tell that silly boy if he comes around and mows my yard for me, Sherman'll give him five dollars. Heh. Five dollars, that's a good wage for a growing boy."

"Grandma Ruth's living with us," I said to Ricky.

"I know that," said the voice on the other end of the line. "Grandma Lucy told us. She still thinks Grandpa Sherman's still living."

"Yeah."

"Shit. Yeah, we'll be at the party. Bill's gonna call Grandpa Ted and talk to him tonight."

Then there were some shuffling-around noises, then my father's voice: "The insurance job is going very well," he said as a twisted form of greeting to a son he hadn't spoken to in two years. "I just got another raise. We bought a house last year, and I'm thinking of putting in a pool in the back yard."

"Great," I said.

"You have any girlfriends yet?"

"Sorta," I said.

"Sorta?" he repeated. "What the hell's 'sorta'?"

"I'm gonna ask Stephanie Carmichael to come to the party with me."

"Ricky's taking his girlfriend. You're taking your girlfriend. Meredith's taking her boyfriend."

At best the moment was extremely uncomfortable. I felt like I should say something, so I blurted out: "It's not Mr. Skordos. It's a different guy."

There was a long silence. "Thanks, Duncan, I really needed that. Pour some more sodium chloride into my wounds."

"Sorry," I said.

"I'm teasing you, fairy boy," said Bill. "No, you have a girlfriend so you're not a fairy. I'm fine, Duncan. I barely even think about your mother anymore. I will say it surprised me that your Grandpa Ted kept the silent treatment up for so long though."

"He's talking to you now?" I said.

"Sorta," he said, imitating the tone I used when I said the same word. "We'll be talking things out this evening. Everything will be fine as paint and right as might on Saturday night." He chuckled, as if he'd suddenly found his unintentional rhyme to be greatly amusing. "Ricky needs to use the phone so he can call Denise, probably to ask her if he can get to third base. So I've got to go. See you Saturday."

He hung up.

Grandma Ruth said, "Rowdy Howdy's dad's a son of a bitch though."

She bit into her popsicle stick and winced.

"No," said Stephanie.

"Oh. How come?"

Two of her friends stood behind her trying not to laugh, but I didn't care: I'd been mustering up the courage to do this all year.

"We're... gonna... go see somebody else besides you." And then Stephanie began to laugh, and her friends happily joined her.

They all walked off toward the hallway outside of the cafeteria, where all the kids were signing one another's yearbooks.

I followed from a distance, not because I wanted to talk to Stephanie again but because I knew my own friends would be in the hallway also. I found Schultz and Doug and Nim standing just outside the cafeteria doors. I told them what had happened.

Nim shook her head. "Stephanie's a... a snot."

"You wanted to call her something else," said Schultz.

"Fine, she's a bitch," Nim said, lowering her voice so the teachers wouldn't hear.
"Duncan, don't worry about it. I'll be at the party so I'll dance with you."

Grandma Lucy and Grandpa Ted had told me to invite as many friends as I wanted. Nim was already going with her mother; Vena Rainer and Meredith were becoming closer friends all the time. Schultz was going, though I think it was more because he wanted to see Rhiannon than anything else. Doug wouldn't be able to make it because his family was going to Chicago to see his aunt and uncle. Preacher Ellis had been invited (along with about half the town) and he'd called back to say he'd definitely be there and he'd bring his family along, so we'd have to deal with Taylor as well.

"I don't know how to dance," I said.

"I'll show you."

"I don't know."

"Duncan Pierce, you could do a lot worse than me."

"You're pretty confident," Schultz said, smirking.

"I need to be if I'm going to be an actress."

"So you can act like you'll be able to teach Duncan how to dance."

Nim reached over and shoved Schultz off his feet.

Mr. Green strolled over from the small group of chattering teachers. "What's going on, Miss Rainer?"

Nim shook her head. "Sorry, Mr. Green. It's just, he's... he's being a... he's being about impossible to take!"

Doug stared at the floor, which was what he almost always did when in such close proximity to a teacher.

Schultz got to his feet and said, "She's kinda right, I mean, I was picking on her. She didn't hurt me any."

"Step outside with me," Nim said.

"There will be no stepping outside," said Mr. Green, straightening his tie without realizing he was doing it. "Listen to me. Neither of you are incapable of reason. You know how to properly conduct yourselves. I wonder if you could do so, given it's the last day of school?"

"I don't know, it's kind of a stretch," Schultz joked.

Mr. Green said, "We will leave your fate up to your friends. Mr. Pierce, who started this little argument?"

I thought for a second, then said, "Doug."

Doug's face turned a dark shade of crimson. I grinned.

Mr. Green tried not to smile. "Mr. Fry," he said, "was this due to your machinations?"

"No, I'm just standing here," said Doug. "To my *what*?"

"Okay," Nim said abruptly, "we're not going to fight."

"That is all I wanted to hear," said Mr. Green. "You're a fine group of people, and I'm going to miss you next year. I only hope the next batch of students are a tenth as entertaining."

I'll never forget he said that. He wasn't a man to give out compliments lightly. I'm almost positive he was being serious.

Uncle Everett and Aunt Monica rented out the Bentleyville Reception Hall for the evening. It was their gift to Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy. I'd have to put up with Bill, Ricky, Taylor Ellis, *and* Lanie the Cousin From Hell, all in one night. My plan was to spend as much time eating as possible; if my mouth was full, I reasoned, I wouldn't have to talk to any of them as much.

Lanie was the official greeter. She'd changed since the last time I'd seen her: she was taller, her teeth a lot straighter, her braces gone, her hair a little less stringy than before. Nevertheless she felt compelled to call me a baby kangaroo, as she'd done three

years before, and insist that I save her a dance. She also ordered Schultz to save her a dance, but he pretended not to hear her.

"You don't have to dance with her," Rhiannon muttered to him as we walked away from Lanie's spot next to the door.

"What if I dance with you instead?"

"That won't happen if you get on my nerves tonight." And with that my sister headed for Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy's table to wish them a happy fortieth anniversary.

"That's the most she's talked to me in six months," Schultz said to me.

"You don't have a chance," said Nim.

"It speaks!" Schultz said. "I can't wait to see you dancing with Duncan."

Whatever Nim was about to say was interrupted by Wally Garland, who walked over to us dressed in a black tux with tails. "Like the duds?"

"Man, this dude is sharp!" said Schultz. "I thought we'd all just be wearing T-shirts and jeans."

Wally grinned. "Everett and Monica wanted me to be the deejay, so I figured I'd better do it up right. But I think a tuxedo suits me. I might wear one every day. Sit around the house watching the ball game, call my friends and go, 'Guess what I'm doing? I'm wearing a tux! That's right, a tux! Fear me.' I'll be the grooviest thing you ever saw."

"You *are* groovy, Mr. Garland," said Nim.

Wally surprised Schultz and me by bowing to her. "And you are the most beautiful woman here. But don't tell Meredith I said that! Now if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna check the music selection, make sure there's no Willie Nelson in there. I don't think there will be, but ol' Willie, he's pretty slick. Shows up everywhere."

Meanwhile Meredith was chasing Benny back and forth past the food tables; Rhiannon was pretending to listen intently to Aunt Monica's account of the diets she'd

gone on in the past year; Vena Rainer, Nim's mom, meticulously rearranged the seemingly endless plates of cheese and crackers, lunchmeats, veggies, and other assorted snacks; Grandma Ruth was standing near the windows, shoulders hunched, trying to do something that looked roughly like the Charleston even though no music was playing yet; Preacher Ellis, who'd just arrived with Mrs. Ellis and Taylor, was having an oddly animated discussion with Lanie, who appeared to be trying to start a completely different conversation with Taylor simultaneously; and right in the center of it all, there was Grandpa Ted doing a fairly accurate impression of Uncle Everett for Grandma Lucy and several men and women about Grandpa's age, while the real Uncle Everett looked on with a fixed smile on his face, absently running his hands over his bald head. Uncle Everett had a good sense of humor, but sometimes when he became the butt of the jokes he didn't seem to know how to take it. But ultimately a smile fell over his face, as if he'd realized that his father was including him in the joke.

I started having so much fun just watching my family and friends that the next time I checked my watch I found that almost forty minutes had gone by since we'd arrived. Wally was not merely a deejay but seemed to be master of ceremonies as well, which was strange because for us he had replaced the son of the guests of honor in our lives. About a month before the party he'd mentioned to me in passing that maybe someday soon he'd be marrying my mother. That was weird for me to think about, so for the most part I didn't, but occasionally I tried to imagine having a father figure actually living in the house again, and my normally fertile imagination failed me completely. Yet I really liked Wally. So did Benny, but Benny liked everybody. Rhiannon still watched Wally very closely, as if she thought the minute she stopped scrutinizing Wally's every move he would pack up and leave us just as our real father had done. I understood, and I think Wally did too, because he gave her all the space she seemed to need.

Then the music pulsed and throbbed its way through the room and into our eardrums--"Oops, I'll turn that down!" said Wally--and it was an old-time waltz I'd never

heard before and Grandpa Ted was reaching an old calloused hand out to Grandma Lucy to help her up from her chair, and they made their way to the center of the floor that had been cleared for dancing. Grandma's footing was slow and unsure, Grandpa's steady and giving. Grandma's bony frame shook, whether from nervousness or advancing age I couldn't be certain. Grandpa spoke softly to her, using a gentle voice he only used when speaking to her, a voice that was uniquely his.

Then Grandma Ruth stepped up to the waltzing couple, nudging Grandma Lucy aside, and tried to take Grandpa Ted's hands and Grandma Lucy's place. Next to me Meredith hissed an order to Rhiannon to watch Benny, and then she was out there pulling Grandma Ruth away. Grandma Ruth started to scream: *"It's not fair! Lucy always gets to have a husband! Mine died! My Sherman, he died! He died I'm alone he died! Get your hands off me, Melancholy!"*

She kept yelling, but she allowed my mother to escort her out the door.

About twenty minutes later Meredith came back, saying only that she'd taken her to Uncle Jim's.

My father and Ricky showed up late. About two hours into the party. Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy had danced to two or three more slow songs by then, each time holding onto each other even more tightly than they had before Grandma Ruth's escapade. Grandma Lucy had arthritis so she couldn't stay out on the dance floor for too long at a time, but I think she may have pushed her limits about as far as she possibly could so she could dance with Grandpa a bit longer.

Wally played several fast songs; I liked those because I could just wiggle around and move from side to side and nod my head and kick up a lot of energy, and I knew that nobody was laughing at how silly I looked because they all looked just as silly. Schultz danced so hard there was sweat dripping from his face, as if he'd just finished playing a full-court basketball game. Rhiannon and Lanie and Nim gradually formed something of

an alliance out on the dance floor, singing all the songs with more joy than I'd ever seen from any of them, walking like Egyptians and shaking tailfeathers and twisting again like they did last summer. Once or twice I stopped dancing because it was more fun just to watch them, and somebody would run into me and apologize, and I'd snap out of it and start dancing again. Even Taylor danced to a song or two, until the Preacher called him over and talked to him a while and then Taylor sat with his parents at a table to themselves and didn't dance for the rest of the night.

Near the end of "Hip to be Square" we saw a small, familiar figure hopping around next to Lanie and Nim. Benny was breaking into our circle; he giggled and clapped and jumped around. He was also blissfully unaware that he was in danger of being trampled out there. Meredith rushed out to the dance floor for the second time that evening, this time to collect her son instead of her mother. At that moment Wally switched the songs from fast to slow, from Huey Lewis to the fifties instrumental "Sleepwalk," and I turned back to see that Bill had arrived and was attempting to slow-dance with my mother. Rhiannon stared, apparently unable to believe what was happening. I picked up Benny and headed back to our table, followed by Nim and Lanie. Finally Rhiannon joined us back at the table, but she sat down and kept watching them with even more scrutiny than she'd given Wally Garland over the past ten months.

"Duncan, what's going on?" Nim asked me.

"This new baby is so cute!" Lanie said, giving Benny a hug. She looked at me.

"But he can't replace you. You'll always be my kangaroo baby!"

Schultz, who was sitting at the other end of our large round table eating what was probably his third or fourth gondola, groaned loud enough for us to hear him over the music.

"I'll dance with my baby kangaroo now," said Lanie.

"Like hell," said Nim. "I called it first. Dance with Schultz."

Schultz stuffed his face with gondola, letting cheese and lunchmeat hang out of his mouth in an attempt to disgust my cousin. It didn't work, and he and Lanie stepped out on the dance floor at roughly the same time that Nim and I did.

I didn't know where to put my hands. Nim put her hands on my shoulders; this seemed logical, so I did the same thing. She moved my hands from her shoulders to her sides. "That's how you're supposed to do it," she said.

"Sorry."

"It's okay." She was shorter than me, but at that moment I had the bizarre sensation that she was far more powerful. It was something in her eyes. "Duncan, if you need to talk about whatever's going on with your family, I'm here. Your Nim. Your Nim is here."

"Thanks," I said.

Over her shoulder I saw Meredith plant a quick kiss on Bill's cheek.

"She just kissed him," I said. "My mother just kissed my father. That's not supposed to be a bad thing, but it is."

She nodded.

We swayed back and forth, not saying anything, for what felt like at least four or five centuries.

Then Nim said, "What are they doing now?"

I looked over her shoulder again. "Just dancing."

When I looked back at Nim's face I saw that she was smiling. Her green eyes sparkled. "In movies the lady sometimes leans her head on the man's shoulder. Like this." She rested her head on my left shoulder, awkwardly. We danced, just like that, until the song ended. Then she walked away.

I didn't follow her to the table. Somehow I ended up on the other side of the room, at Wally's table where he was changing the music.

He gave me his goofy grin, then spoke into the microphone:

“Ted and Lucy are just amazing,” he said, and just about everyone in the room applauded. “Yeah. Together forty years, and the way they look at each other, they just, they, I don’t have anything funny to say for once.” Laughter from the crowd. “Okay, so maybe I do.

“They told me to dedicate a song to a woman who’s here tonight. A woman they think of as almost like their own daughter. And since I’m playing the tunes, and since I happen to love that woman as well, I’m going to choose the song. This is for Meredith.”

I looked around but couldn’t see where my parents had gone.

Wally turned to me, grinned again, and said, “Watch this.”

He pressed play.

The song we heard was “I Want To Walk You Home” by Fats Domino. Wally began to scan the crowd for Meredith, singing along with Fats under his breath: “I love the way you walk... I love to hear you talk...”

Meredith did not come forward.

The song played itself out, and when it ended Wally spoke into the microphone again: “Um, yeah, we’ll uh, we’ll try that again later.” He put on another Huey Lewis tune and sat down, staring impassively at his untouched plate of food.

I sat there with him for the next twenty minutes or so, helping him change the music and writing down people’s requests. On the next slow song we played I actually saw Rhiannon dancing with Schultz. It was only for the one song, but he talked about it every time I saw him for the next two or three weeks. Grandpa Ted and Grandma Lucy made that same song their last dance; they spent the rest of the night sitting at their table, watching everyone else, his hand carefully patting hers on top of the table. I did dance with Nim again, but not until my mother came back. She whispered something to Wally, and he put on the longest slow song he could find and they made their way to the dance floor.

After Nim and I danced again, I suddenly realized I hadn't even seen Ricky yet. I was still mad at both him and Bill for leaving us, but at that moment I was more curious just to see what he was like now.

I caught him just as he was leaving with my father. Bill hadn't changed a bit, but Ricky was now very tall and his shoulders were very broad, and his stomach was slender.

"You're not fat now," I said.

"He's still a little fatheaded," said Bill.

"Where's your girlfriend?"

Ricky shrugged. "I guess she didn't like me as much as I thought."

I nodded.

"You look like you're doing pretty good though, Dungball. What're you doing with Nim Rainer?"

"We're just friends," I said, a bit too quickly.

"Fuck," said Ricky.

"We have to go," my father said. "We're not all that welcome here."

"But didn't Grandma Lucy say--"

Bill shook his head. "Not tonight."

"You have to stay this time," I surprised myself by saying. I don't even know why I said it, except that the night was already beginning to take on the contours of a dream and nothing seemed real at this point.

"We'll be around. Goodbye, though."

Bill stepped out the door. Ricky looked at me.

"The only reason I chose him is because she'd done something bad and I thought you guys would choose him too," he said.

I didn't say anything. I believed him, but I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Later," he said, and he left.

I wandered back to the party, which was beginning to wind down. Nim and her mother had to leave. Both of them hugged me; Nim also gave me a tiny kiss on the neck, and it was so fast and so subtle that nobody else could possibly have known she did it. Rhiannon walked over to Wally and shook his hand, then walked away without saying a word. Lanie called me her baby kangaroo a few more times while Uncle Everett and Aunt Monica were taking the leftovers off the food tables. Grandma Lucy told Meredith how wonderful it all was and how much she loved all of us for making the night a perfect one. Nobody mentioned Grandma Ruth. Schultz told me that the Preacher and Mrs. Ellis and Taylor had left early so they could get a good night's sleep for the next morning's church service. Grandpa Ted actually picked me up and set me up on his shoulders and walked back and forth across the reception hall floor a couple times, talking to me in just about every voice I'd ever heard him do; then he did the same thing with Benny. I watched them all; in my mind I can still see them. They are frozen in my memories, frozen in time. They are the faces that are superimposed over the void when I close my eyes...